


LEISURE • 2744-5 • \$4.50

# Renegade Heart

MADELINE BAKER

Bestselling author of *Reckless Desire*





Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2017 with funding from  
Kahle/Austin Foundation



# MADELINE BAKER

*The premier name in Indian Romance.*

1988 winner of the *Romantic Times* Reviewers  
Choice Award for Best Indian Romance Series.

*Here's what the critics have to say about Madeline  
Baker's scorching romances:*

"Madeline Baker proved she knows how to please  
readers of historical romance when she created  
RECKLESS HEART and LOVE IN THE WIND."

—*Whispers* (B. Dalton Romance Club)

"Madeline Baker fans will be thrilled with her latest  
and best Indian romance. Readers will clutch wildly  
at their handkerchiefs while being caught up in the  
lovers' triangle, and don't be surprised if you shout  
for joy as Lorelee and Shad LOVE FOREVER-  
MORE."

—*Romantic Times*







**"YOU'VE ONLY GOT TWO  
CHOICES: ME OR THEM," TYREE  
SAID.**

"What kind of choice is that?" Rachel whimpered.

"Not much, I reckon. But if you refuse me, Many Eagles is gonna kill me for lyin' to him. And when his bucks are through with you, you'll probably wish you were dead, too."

"But I've never . . . I mean, I'm still—"

Tyree swore irritably. "You tryin' to tell me you're still a virgin?"

It sounded like a sin, the way he said it.

"Well, you won't be much longer," Tyree drawled.

"This can't be happening," Rachel thought numbly. But it was. As though hypnotized, she watched Tyree undress. His hands were big and brown and they moved purposefully and without haste as he removed his pants. She gasped aloud as he stood partially naked before her, his skin as dark as the skin of the leering Apaches. . . .



Other Leisure books by Madeline Baker:

RECKLESS HEART  
LOVE IN THE WIND  
RECKLESS LOVE  
LOVE FOREVERMORE  
RECKLESS DESIRE



# Renegade Heart

MADELINE BAKER

LEISURE BOOKS  NEW YORK CITY

*To my husband Bill  
who makes it possible  
for me to stay home  
and write to my heart's content.*

**A LEISURE BOOK**

**March 1989**

**Published by**

**Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.  
276 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10001**

**Copyright © 1989 by Madeline Baker**

**All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law.**

**The name "Leisure Books" and the stylized "LB" with design are trademarks of Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.**

**Printed in the United States of America**



## *Prologue*

*H*is name was Logan Tyree and he was on the run. And like every other man who had ever been lucky enough to escape from the hell-hole known as Yuma Prison, he was determined never to return. Better to die of thirst beneath a blistering Arizona sun, or bleed to death from the heavy .45 caliber slug lodged low in his left side than return to a life behind bars.

Yuma Territorial Prison! A hundred and ten degrees in the shade. A miserable five-by-eight foot cell; no windows, just cold gray walls and a steel-barred door. Yuma! Eighteen months of scummy lukewarm water and putrid food not fit for a pig. Lice-infested blankets and heavy chains. Chains that hobbled his feet and

curbed his long, carefree stride. Chains that rattled annoyingly with every step, loudly proclaiming the loss of his freedom. Chains that scarred his flesh and shriveled his soul.

Well, the chains were gone, he mused sourly, but the scars remained. He carried other scars, too—faint, silvery streaks that crisscrossed his broad back and shoulders like a finely spun spider web. Scars left by the whip.

Damn! Just the thought of the lash was enough to make him break out in a cold sweat. There had been one guard in whose hands the lash had come alive, until it was no longer nine feet of limp rawhide, but a sibilant twisting tongue of flame that danced endlessly over shrinking, cringing flesh.

They only had to beat him once. Other men, rebelliously proud and foolishly stubborn, died under the lash sobbing for mercy. But Tyree was no fool. There was no hope where there was no life, and there was no mercy in the Yuma pen. And so he had swallowed his pride and curbed his tongue. Outwardly, he became a model prisoner, forcing himself to say "Yes, sir" and "No, sir", obeying every command meekly and without question or complaint. And all the while he was seething inside. Seething with the need to be free, to see the stark beauty of the Arizona desert, to climb the lofty mountains of Montana, to ride across the vast rolling grasslands of the Dakotas. The love of the wild country was strong within him and he had yearned for the

unfettered freedom of the plains as some inmates had yearned for whiskey or women or a deck of cards.

Prison life had not come easy to a man who had never been tied down; a man who had never in his whole adult life had to arrange his days by the rigid discipline of a clock. Always, he had done as he pleased when he pleased, and it had rankled deep inside when he was compelled to rise when he wanted to sleep, eat when he wasn't hungry or go without, meekly submitting his will to the will of others. No, it had not been easy, skulking around like a whipped cur with its tail tucked between its legs; but it had paid off.

Thinking him to be a broken man, the guards had used Tyree to run errands from one prison building to another. He had played the part of a cowed con so well the guards got careless in his presence. And their carelessness had cost two of them their lives, and earned Tyree the freedom he had so desired.

Pushing the memory aside, Tyree slapped his weary mount with the reins, demanding another burst of speed from an animal already on the brink of exhaustion. A white man would have been shocked at the brutal way he pushed the heavily lathered bay mare, but Tyree had been raised by the Apache. And it was the Apache way to ride a horse until it dropped and then, if there was time, to eat the carcass.

He swore softly as the bay stumbled, pray-



ing that the game little mare's strength would last until he reached the Mescalero stronghold high in the distant mountains, or at least until he found a decent place to make a stand against the posse that was little more than two hours behind him.

But even as the thought crossed his mind, the bay stumbled for the last time. Badly jarred, Tyree leaped from the saddle seconds before the horse rolled onto its side. There was blood dribbling from the mare's flared nostrils, the empty look of death in her liquid brown eyes.

Squinting against the blinding sun, Tyree searched his backtrail. There was no sign of the posse, but he knew Fat Ass and his henchmen were closing in on him, snuffling at his heels like buffalo wolves on the scent of a wounded calf. And so Tyree began to walk, one hand pressed hard against his wounded side. The exertion brought a fresh sheen of sweat to his face as rolling waves of pain splintered down his left side.

The desert floor dipped, dropped to a shallow bowl, angled upward once more, and now he was in a patchwork land of red-walled canyons and shallow arroyos. Pausing briefly on a narrow rocky ledge, he scanned the surrounding countryside. A wide thread of blue snaked its way southward toward Mexico, and freedom. For a moment, he was sorely tempted to head for the river. But that was exactly what the posse would expect him to

do, and so he continued northward toward the sandhills, laboriously plodding through the deep sand. Each step required a concentrated effort of will, each breath caused his wound to throb with renewed vigor, but he moved forward with relentless determination, grinning crookedly as the soft sand absorbed his tracks, leaving no telltale sign of his passing.

Topping the last dune, he hunkered down on his heels in the scant shade offered by a stunted saguaro. Lifting his hand from his side, he scowled bleakly at the sticky red wetness coating his palm, quietly cursing the guard who had shot him. Grimacing, he removed the crude bandage swathed around his middle. The wound, now two days old, was festering. Bright red streaks spread fan-like from the mouth of the bullet hole like spokes on a wheel.

Replacing the sodden bandage, Tyree wished fleetingly for a cold glass of beer to chase the dust from his throat. Or, better still, for a tall glass of Kentucky bourbon to dull the searing ache in his side. But such wishes were futile and quickly forgotten as a rising cloud of dust caught his eye.

From his vantage point atop the dune, he watched the twelve-man posse ride into view. They drew rein near the bay mare's carcass, talking excitedly as they dismounted to check the ground for sign. Brody, the territorial marshal, was easily identified, even from a



distance. Grossly overweight, he lumbered around like a fat, two-legged grizzly.

There wasn't a bona fide tracker in the lot, Tyree mused, and breathed a silent prayer of thanks to Usen that this posse had neither dogs nor Indians to guide them. They were stupid, Tyree thought contemptuously. So very stupid. Shuffling around like headless chickens, they were blotting out the very tracks they hoped to find.

In seconds, the few prints Tyree had left were gone, obliterated beneath the careless boot heels of a dozen men. He vented a sigh of relief as the posse remounted and rode south, toward the border. Sooner or later, Tyree knew Brody would realize his mistake and turn back. But there was no point in worrying about that now. With a grin, he rose to his feet and started down the backside of the dune.

Halfway down, he stumbled in the soft sand, tumbling head over heels to the bottom of the sandy slope. He lay there for a full five minutes, wondering if he shouldn't just curl up and die. But he had never been a quitter. Summoning what strength he had left, he gained his feet and continued walking north; a tall, dark man dressed in blue denim pants and a checked shirt stolen from a washline along the way. The clothes did not fit well. The pants were too short for his long muscular legs, the shirt too small to comfortably accommodate his broad shoulders. Though he was not a handsome man in the usual sense of



the word, he possessed an aura of strength and virility that most women found irresistibly attractive. His hair, long and inky black, curled slightly at the nape of his neck. His mouth was wide, his jaw firm, hinting at stubbornness, his nose was a broad slash. His eyes were a curious shade of yellow, narrowed now to mere slits against the midday sun. A thick moustache and a coarse beard covered the lower half of his face.

The pain in his side throbbed with the steady precision of an Apache war drum, but he pressed steadily onward, his face an impassive mask that revealed none of the agony coursing through his left side. The desert was an oven, the sun was the flame, and he was the meat, cooking slowly, until all the juice had been baked from his flesh and only a dry husk remained.

His feet were like lead and it was an effort to put one foot in front of the other. Misjudging a step, he fell, jarring his wound, and he felt the blood flow warm and wet down his left flank. Bright shafts of pain danced up and down his side. It was, he reminded himself, a small price to pay for his freedom. And if the festering wound killed him, so be it. Better to die free in the desert than to live behind the high gray walls and cold iron bars of Yuma, where every day was the same as the last, and every night longer than the night before.

The air grew colder as the miles slipped by, and he shivered convulsively. Though he had

not eaten for two days, his desire was not for meat, but for water. Just one sip to ease his nagging thirst. But there was no sign of water and so he plodded ever northward, bound for the lodges of the Mescalero Apache. There would be water in the rancheria, all he could drink. There would be food to fill his hungry belly, friendly faces to cheer him, gentle hands to ease his pain, a snug lodge where he could rest in peace and comfort.

Sleep. His body cried for it. And still he moved drunkenly forward, driven by sheer will alone. Slowly, so slowly, the sun slipped behind the distant mountains, turning the western sky to flame and the earth to blood.

With the coming of dusk, a chill wind began to blow across the face of the land, keening like a grieving Comanche squaw. And still he walked, doggedly placing one foot in front of the other, keeping one ear cocked for the sound of hoofbeats coming from the south. Because Brody would come. Sooner or later, he would come.

But the land remained dark and quiet save for the wail of the wind and the rasp of his own labored breathing. Overhead, the stars came alive in the sky, sparkling like a million diamonds carelessly tossed across the black blanket of the heavens, and still he walked, until his legs turned to stone and refused to move another inch. Groggy with the need for sleep, burning with fever, he sought shelter for the night in a shallow hollow that smelled



strongly of skunk. Dizzy with exhaustion, weak from the loss of blood and lack of food and water, he collapsed in the hole, groaning as he landed on his injured side. Gasping with pain, he huddled in the dirt while bright lights flashed before his eyes. A sudden warmth along his left flank told him he was bleeding again, but he was too far gone in pain to care.

Death hovered over him, and with the end of life in sight, he pondered his beginnings, and the fate that had brought him to die in the desert, alone. . . .

He did not remember his father at all. And his mother was only a vague shadow, a warm memory of soft flesh and strong perfume. Later, unkind people would tell him the truth about his parents; about the half-breed Comanche who was hung for a horse thief, about the young Irish prostitute who gave him life in a bordello in a sleepy Texas town and then, three years later, abandoned him to run off with a two-bit gambler.

No one wanted a quarter-breed bastard, and so the child was sent to live with the nuns at a small Spanish convent located near the Mexican border, and there he stayed until he was eight years old. It was then the nuns decided the convent was no place for a boy, especially a boy as impudent and rebellious as Tyree. Inquiries were made and the nuns found him a foster home . . . and then another . . . and another.

He was not an easy child to love—the quiet,



sullen-faced boy with the suspicious amber eyes.

He was 12 years old and living with a bald-headed German farmer and his kindly wife when the Apaches came, killing the German couple, but sparing Tyree because there was no mistaking the Indian blood that ran in the boy's veins.

He lived with the Mescalero for thirteen years, and they were good years. He grew to manhood, became a warrior, took a wife . . . Red Leaf was her name. She came to him untouched and unafraid, fulfilling every dream he had ever hoped for. Friend, mother, sister, wife—she was all women rolled into one. Daily, he thanked all the Apache gods for the beautiful raven-haired woman who shared his lodge and made his life worthwhile. He had thought to spend the rest of his life with the Apache, but six white men came along one fine summer day and changed the course of Tyree's life.

He had been walking beside the river with Red Leaf that fateful day. They were alone, far from camp, when the white men attacked. Tyree had fought them as best he could, but his knife was no match for six rifles. A bullet grazed his arm, another pierced his shoulder. And then one of the men got behind him and buffaloeed him with a rifle butt.

When he regained consciousness, Red Leaf was dead. He had stared at her mutilated corpse for a long time, unable to believe his

eyes, until the vomit came and he fell to his knees.

When his stomach stopped heaving, he wrapped her body in his shirt and buried her beneath a windblown pine. And as he smoothed the dirt over her grave, all that was kind and gentle seemed to wither and die within him.

He sat by her grave all the rest of that long lonely day and night, remembering the good times they had shared, the sound of her laughter, the touch of her body against his in the quiet of the night, the way her dark eyes had glowed with love whenever he kissed her.

Slowly, the stars wheeled across the sky, and he stared, unseeing, into the darkness. A lone coyote wailed in the distance, and its melancholy cry was like the echo of his own grief.

Gradually, the horizon grew light, and when the sun rose above the mountains, Logan Tyree had shed his last tear. Relentless as a starved lobo, he prowled the river's edge, searching the ground for sign, casting about in ever-widening circles, using all the skills the Mescalero had taught him.

He was not disappointed. Hours of painstaking effort rewarded him with that which he so eagerly sought. Moments later he was tracking six iron-shod ponies headed southeast. It did not occur to him to ask the Apache for help. They would have been willing, even eager, to take a few paleface scalps, but aveng-



ing Red Leaf's death was something he needed to do alone.

The tracks separated near New Mexico: four sets going towards Colorado, two sets drifting south towards Texas. He followed the first trail because it was the biggest. And found the four men sleeping beside the dying embers of a campfire. The first four, caught while his grief was still fresh, died the hardest. Their screams had been the sweetest music he had ever heard.

Ironically, he found the last two men in the same dirty whorehouse where he had been born. He had killed them where he found them, giving them no chance to plead their innocence, no time to defend themselves, no opportunity to call for help.

And so Red Leaf's death was avenged, and now there was a terrible emptiness inside, for he had neither love to warm him nor hate to sustain him. Unable to face the thought of returning to the Apache now that she was dead, he drifted into Abilene, Kansas. And somehow, without rhyme or reason, he became a hired gun, quickly earning a reputation as a merciless, cold-blooded killer. As time passed, his reputation grew and spread, until he found himself being credited with murders he hadn't committed, accused of crimes he knew nothing about, crimes that occurred in towns where he had never been.

But they had caught him red-handed in Arizona, the gun still in his hand, the body



*Renegade Heart*

bleeding at his feet. Perhaps, if the woman had been white, they would have rewarded him for killing the man who had been trying to beat her to death with an axe handle.

But the woman had been an Apache squaw, the white man had been her husband, and Tyree had been sentenced to 99 years in the Yuma Pen. . . .



## Chapter 1

Rachel Halloran smiled warmly at the young man sitting beside her on the front porch swing.

"I'll miss you, Clint," she said, her voice soft as honey. "You will be careful, won't you?"

Clint Wesley's grin was as bright as the six-pointed star pinned to his vest.

"Caution's my middle name, Rachel. You know that."

Rachel laughed softly. Clint *was* cautious. He never made a move that hadn't been carefully thought out in advance. She knew he loved her, wanted to marry her, yet his courtship had been slow and predictable. He had spoken to her several times in church—only after they had been formally introduced



by a mutual friend, of course. After that, he had sought her out at socials and picnics. A few months later, he had asked her father if he might come to call. Now he came to see her every Saturday night and more often than not, Rachel invited him to Sunday dinner as well. Their romance was very circumspect. After they had dated for a month and a half, Clint found the courage to hold her hand. A few months later, he summoned the nerve to put his arm around her shoulders when they sat together on the porch swing. Just recently, he had found the courage to kiss her. He had asked her permission first, of course. Somehow, that had irritated her, though she was careful not to let it show. She supposed she loved Clint and would likely marry him one day in the future, but sometimes she wished he was more exciting, more spontaneous. If he wanted to kiss her, why didn't he just sweep her into his arms and kiss her?

Rachel sighed softly as Clint's arm went around her shoulders. He was a nice young man and she was terribly fond of him. People just naturally liked Clint. He was tall and handsome, with sandy blond hair and mild blue eyes. He didn't look tough enough to be a lawman and yet he had managed to keep the peace in Yellow Creek for over two years. Of course, few strangers ever came to town, and the local folk rarely violated the town laws, except for Gus Bradshaw, who got roaring

drunk every Saturday night. Rachel wondered, sometimes, how Clint would react if a real bad man ever rode into town.

Clint gave Rachel's shoulders a squeeze. Then, with an audible sigh, he stood up, reaching for his hat.

"Well, I'd best be going," he said reluctantly. "I've got to get an early start in the morning."

Rachel stood up, lifting her face for his kiss. "Take care of yourself," she murmured. "I'll miss you."

Wesley nodded. "I'll see you as soon as I get back."

"I'll be waiting."

Wesley nodded again, wondering if he dared kiss her again. Instead, he gave her a last, quick hug, then went down the stairs to where his horse was hitched to the rail. He swung agilely into the saddle, tipped his hat to Rachel, and rode out of the yard.

Rachel smiled as she watched Clint ride away. He would make her a good husband, she mused as she went up to bed. If he ever got the nerve to propose! He had wanted to kiss her again; she had seen it in his eyes. Why hadn't he done it?

Climbing into bed, she drew the covers to her chin, wishing that Clint Wesley would stop worrying about propriety and sweep her off her feet. She fell asleep thinking of Clint, dreaming of all the towheaded children they would someday have.

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear and warm. Rachel's first thought was of Clint: she hoped he'd gotten off to an early start and would return safely home. Transporting a prisoner from Yellow Creek to the territorial prison at Yuma was always a dangerous assignment. You never knew when a prisoner's friends or relatives would take it into their heads to try and help a convicted man escape his fate. Patrick Murphy, the town's previous lawman, had been killed en route to Yuma, shot down in cold blood by his prisoner's brother. Fortunately, such things were rare, but they did happen.

Resolutely, Rachel put such thoughts from her mind. Slipping out of her blue flannel night rail, she dressed quickly and headed downstairs to prepare breakfast for herself and her father.

She found six year old Amy Cahill waiting for her in the kitchen. Amy was a frequent visitor at the Lazy H. Her uncle, Joe Cahill, was foreman of the Halloran ranch.

"Good morning, Amy," Rachel said cheerfully as she tousled the girl's blond curls.

"You slept late," Amy remarked. "Are we making pies today?"

"If you like." Rachel spread a clean cloth over the kitchen table and put the water on for coffee. "You'll have to pick some berries though. I'm fresh out."

"Can I pick them now?"

"Have you had breakfast yet?"



"At home," Amy said, scooping up the berry basket from a shelf in the pantry. "Mama made pancakes."

"Be careful," Rachel cautioned as Amy skipped out the back door.

"I will," Amy replied, her tone implying that was a warning she heard frequently.

The berry bushes were located behind the smokehouse. It was a long walk, but Amy didn't mind. Skipping along, she glanced at the sand hills located some miles away. She had been admonished time and again not to go there, but she promised herself that one day she would explore the forbidden mountains of sand.

But now, pies were uppermost in her mind. The bushes were heavy with fruit and Amy hummed softly as she moved from bush to bush, collecting blackberries. Her basket was nearly full when she found the man. He was lying in a shallow hole in the ground, partially covered with dead leaves.

Startled, Amy stared at the man for a long time, wondering if he were dead. He looked like he was asleep, but then, her best friend, Joe Bob Somers, said that was how dead people looked, like they were sleeping, so how was a girl to know? The man lay so still, Amy decided he had to be dead, and all the scary stories she had ever heard about ghosts and haunts made her shiver with apprehension.

She was about to turn and run for home when the man rolled over and she found

herself staring into a pair of pain-glazed yellow eyes.

"Are you all right, mister?" Amy queried tremulously. Slowly, she began to back away from the man, surprised to find she was more afraid of him now that she knew he was alive than she had been when she thought he was dead.

"Need help," the man rasped. He tried to sit up, but fell back heavily. His face went white beneath its tan. "Water—"

"Sure, mister. Just lie still and I'll bring help. Honest I will!"

But the man was unconscious again and did not hear her.

Rachel held the front door open as Joe Cahill and two of the Lazy H cowhands carried the unconscious man into the house. Twenty minutes earlier, Amy had run into the kitchen shouting, "A man, Rachel! I found a man in the berry bushes. I thought he was dead, but he wasn't!"

Once Rachel had calmed the excited child down, she had learned that Amy had first gone to her uncle and that Cahill was even then bringing the man to the house.

Rachel looked at the stranger's face as he was carried inside. Who was he? Where had he come from?

"He's bad hurt," Cahill remarked.

"Take him into the spare bedroom," Rachel said. Frowning, she went down the narrow

hallway ahead of the men. Turning left, she entered the spare bedroom located at the end of the hall and quickly turned back the bedclothes.

"Don't know if he's gonna make it," Cahill muttered as the cowhands laid the injured man on the bed. "That bullet wound looks like it's festering."

"It's in God's hands," Rachel murmured. "All we can do is patch him up and hope for the best."

Logan Tyree stirred at the sound of voices but his eyes refused to open and when he tried to speak, the words would not come. Rough hands endeavored to wrest the six-gun from his grasp, but he batted them away, refusing to relinquish his hold on the .44.

"Shit, Candido, let him keep his iron," Joe Cahill growled. Then, remembering where he was, he murmured, "Sorry, Miss Rachel."

"It's all right."

"He ain't gonna turn loose of that Colt," Cahill mused, "but he ain't got the strength to cock the damn thing, neither." Color crept up the back of Cahill's bull-like neck. "'Scuse me again, Miss Rachel."

Rachel smothered a grin. When the men got excited, they often cursed in her presence. Always, they were embarrassed and quick to apologize.

"Leave the gun for now," Rachel said.

Cahill nodded as he followed the cowhands out of the room. If anyone could pull the



stranger through, Rachel Halloran could. Many a man on the Lazy H owed life or limb to her nimble fingers and quick thinking.

Rachel quickly gathered several clean cloths, scissors, disinfectant and a bowl of warm water. Then, taking a deep breath, she began to undress the man lying on the bed. The wound in his side was red, swollen, and infected. Fortunately, she had been blessed with a strong stomach and steady hands and the sight of blood and torn flesh did not send her running for her smelling salts as it did so many of her friends. As the only woman on the ranch, she was often called upon to nurse the sick and tend the wounded. When times were hard and they could not afford the extra help, she often pitched in to work the cattle; occasionally she helped with the branding and the calving, sometimes she helped with the castrating, which was hard dirty work at best and usually left to the men.

With cool efficiency, Rachel began to wash the wound.

Tyree groaned as unseen hands probed for the slug lodged deep in his left side. The slightest touch caused him agony, and he clenched his teeth as the slug was pried from his flesh. Through it all, he held fast to the Colt, finding comfort in the weight and feel of a gun in his hand without remembering why.

Rachel gnawed on her lower lip, her brow knit with determination, as she removed the slug, washed the wound a second time, then swabbed the whole area with strong carbolic.

With a soft grunt of exertion, she rolled the semi-conscious man onto his side so she could remove the sodden, blood-stained linen from the bed. It was then she saw his back. It was badly scarred. She knew men in prison were often flogged for disobedience and she drew back, chilled to the bone by the thought that the man tossing restlessly on the bed might be an escaped felon.

As though hypnotized, she continued to stare in horrified fascination at the broad scarred back, feeling a surge of pity well in her heart. No human being, no matter what his crimes, should be subjected to such cruel abuse.

With tender concern, she washed the broad expanse of sun-bronzed flesh, spread a clean white sheet beneath him, then pulled the bedcovers up over his shoulders.

That done, she studied the man through boldly curious eyes. He was a big man, tall and whipcord lean. Though he was terribly thin, she could see he had once been powerfully built. A thick black moustache and bristly black beard covered the lower portion of his face, making it difficult to determine if he were young or old, handsome or plain.

His language, when he mumbled in his sleep, was coarse, filled with the kind of profanity no lady was ever permitted to hear. Even Rachel, accustomed to the curses of the men who worked the ranch, had rarely heard such foul expletives.

Abruptly, the man began to toss fitfully. His



eyelids flickered open and he stared, unseeing, at Rachel.

"You dirty sonofabitch," he growled in a voice edged with pain. "If my hands were free, I'd take that whip and give you a taste of your own medicine." He lay still, rigid, as though listening to a distant voice, and then he laughed, a deep ugly laugh laced with bitter despair. "Go ahead, you slimy bastard, do your worst!"

Rachel watched in tight-lipped silence as the man's body grew tense from head to heel. His mouth thinned to a taut line and sweat popped out on his brow as he relived the agony of the lash playing across his flesh.

It was too awful to watch. Stepping forward, Rachel placed her hand on the man's shoulder and shook him slightly.

"It's over," she murmured urgently. "Forget it. Sleep now. Hush, hush. It's over. Go to sleep."

Tyree's eyes flickered open as a soft voice murmured words of comfort. He stared at the woman hovering over him, expecting, somehow, to see the face of the woman he had loved more than his own life. But the face hovering above him was pale ivory, not copper; the hair was honey-gold instead of Indian black; the eyes the most incredible shade of sky-blue when they should have been deep chocolate brown.

Disappointed, he closed his eyes and fell into a deep black void that stretched away into infinity.



Rachel stayed at his side almost constantly during the next few days. She held him down when he began to thrash about, fearful that he would rip open the ugly wound in his side. He had already lost a great deal of blood; he could ill afford to lose more should the wound start to bleed again.

The thought that he might be a wanted man gnawed in the back of her mind. Harboring a fugitive was against the law and, though she tried to convince herself he was just a man who had run afoul of outlaws or Indians, she knew deep inside herself that he was wanted by the law. The scars on his back, the odd purple discolorations on his wrists and ankles, undoubtedly caused by shackles, the words he mumbled in his sleep, all pointed to the fact that he was an escaped prisoner.

The man was ever in Rachel's thoughts as she moved from chore to chore. Who was he? What had he done? Was it safe to have such a man in the house? When she voiced her concern to her father, he merely shrugged.

"I don't reckon he'll be much of a threat for another day or two," John Halloran said laconically, "but I'll have one of the boys take him into town to Doc Franklin if his being here bothers you."

"No," Rachel said quickly. "I don't think he should be moved just yet."

The stranger. She could think of little else. Caring for him, she was increasingly aware of the breadth of his shoulders, of the way his long black hair curled around her fingers. His

moustache, though bristly to look at, was soft beneath her fingertips. She tried not to stare at his nakedness when she bathed the sweat from his body or changed the bandage swathed around his middle, but her eyes continually strayed toward his flat belly and lean flanks. He was very brown all over, and not just where the sun had touched him. His legs were long, covered with fine black hair. His hands were large and looked capable of great strength. She blushed furiously when she found herself wondering what it would be like to be touched by those hands, to be held in his arms.

He was trouble. Her instincts told her that. She knew she should pray for his speedy recovery but deep inside, she did not want him to leave and that was silly, because she didn't even know the man. She knew she should insist her father notify the proper authorities immediately, but she was too soft-hearted to have the man sent back to jail now, when he was in such obvious distress. There would be plenty of time for that later, when he was well again.

Tyree woke to pain and darkness and a raging thirst made worse by the fever burning through him. He stirred restlessly on the soft mattress, tossing aside the blankets that weighed him down like lead. His fingers tightened instinctively around the butt of the gun he still held in his right hand as a slight figure materialized out of the shadows. A soft



hand rested lightly on his brow, a cool cloth gently wiped the perspiration from his face and neck. He felt the tension drain from his body as he recognized the dim outline of the woman who was constantly there to tend his needs.

"Lie still," Rachel murmured. "You're among friends." She glanced at the gun in his hand, but did not try to take it from him.

There were many questions Tyree wanted to ask, but when he tried to speak, only a choked whisper emerged from his throat.

There was the sharp smell of sulphur, a sudden burst of light as the woman touched a match to the candle on the bedside table.

"Are you in pain?" Rachel asked kindly. "Is the bandage too tight?"

"No." Tyree's voice was weak, foreign to his ears.

"Is there anyone I should notify?" Rachel asked. "A wife, perhaps?"

"No. Water." His mouth formed the words but no sound emerged.

But the woman understood and quickly poured him a glass of water from the pitcher standing on the bedside table. She lifted his head while he took a long drink. With his thirst quenched, he slept again.

The next few days passed in a kaleidoscope of pain and fever. His side throbbed mercilessly, burning as if all the fires of hell were kindled inside, and he tossed restlessly from side to side, unable to find relief from the searing pain, or from the nightmare images



that haunted his dreams. Dreams of iron bars and cold gray walls, of men long dead, killed by his own hand. At times, Red Leaf's sweetly smiling face filtered into his nightmares and he heard himself babbling incoherently in guttural Apache, heard himself crying her name over and over again, like a frightened child whimpering for its mother.

In his lucid moments, he was ever aware of the woman with the lovely sky-blue eyes sitting quietly by his side. Her face was kind, her eyes sympathetic whether she was gently sponging the rivers of sweat from his brow or easing his thirst with countless cups of water. Always she was there when he needed her, her voice soft and low, as pleasant to the ear as the sound of summer rain on sunbleached prairie grass. Even when he was wandering down the dark corridors of the past, he was somehow aware of her presence lingering nearby, willing him to get well. Perversely, he resented her constant attention and concern, resented the weakness that made him dependent on another human being.

But nothing lasts forever, and a man either gets better or he dies. And Tyree was not ready to die. The day soon came when he opened his eyes and knew the worst was over. His fever was down, leaving him weak as a newborn pup. His side was stiff and sore, painfully tender to touch, but for all that, he felt better than he had in days.

How many days, he wondered, glancing

curiously at his surroundings. There wasn't much to see, just a narrow room sparsely furnished with a small oak table, a tall chest of drawers, and the bed he occupied. His clothes, neatly washed and ironed, were folded on top of the dresser. His .44 rested on the table beside the bed within easy reach of his hand. He wondered how the woman had managed to wrest it from his grasp. He was surprised to discover the Colt was still loaded, the hammer resting on an empty chamber.

He was halfheartedly thinking of trying to get up when the bedroom door swung open on well-oiled hinges and the woman with the sky-blue eyes stepped into the room, skirts swishing about her ankles. She frowned as Tyree's hand closed over the butt of the .44, one long brown finger curling automatically around the trigger.

"Surely you must realize I mean you no harm," Rachel remarked dryly, and Tyree noticed for the first time that she was hardly more than a girl, perhaps nineteen or twenty.

But what a beauty! A wealth of long honey-gold hair tied back with a white grosgrain ribbon, eyes as deep and blue as the Pacific, a small, tip-tilted nose, and a mouth made to be kissed. He had not seen a woman in a long time and his eyes lingered on her figure, admiring the way it went in and out in all the right places. A wide blue sash circled a waist so narrow, he was certain he could span it with one hand.

For a moment, he contemplated dragging her into bed with him and sampling the pouting pink lips that looked as soft as the petals of a wild rose.

"Well?" Rachel said, looking pointedly at the gun he still held in his hand.

With a wry grin, Tyree put the gun aside. "How long have I been here?"

"Nearly a week."

Tyree digested that for a moment, his face thoughtful. "The kid that found me, she yours?"

"No. She's Joe Cahill's niece."

"Cahill?"

"He's our foreman. Amy lives in town, but she comes out to visit Joe on weekends."

"Well, I'm obliged to you and the kid," Tyree said, swinging his long legs over the side of the narrow bed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll get dressed and be on my way."

Rachel frowned at him. Was he kidding? He was in no condition to travel. She was about to tell him so in no uncertain terms when the sheet fell away from his body, exposing his lean torso, flat belly, and one long muscular thigh. A corner of the sheet barely covered his groin.

Rachel's eyes strayed in that direction and she felt hot color wash into her cheeks at his knowing grin. She had seen him nude, of course, when she nursed him, but that had been vastly different. He had been inert then, sick and unable to care for himself. But he



was awake and alert now and even though he was still weak and pale, there was an aura of strength and vitality about him that she found both frightening and fascinating.

"Don't you dare move!" Rachel snapped, stung by his abrupt manner and his total lack of modesty. "You're in no fit condition to travel."

"I'll manage."

Rachel's smile was poisonously sweet as she gathered up Tyree's clothing and tucked it securely under one arm. Her tone was equally venomous when she spoke.

"I am sure you could manage quite well," she said, biting off each word. "But I do not intend to see my efforts in your behalf wasted. You are not to set foot out of that bed for at least another week." She gave him another cloying smile. "Now, you just lie there like a good boy and I'll bring you some breakfast. You look like you could use some solid food."

And so saying, she turned on her heel and flounced out of the room, Tyree's clothes bundled securely under one arm, her back ramrod straight with determination.

Tyree swore under his breath. What the hell! Who did she think she was, anyway, telling him what he could and couldn't do? Damned interfering female!

He grinned wryly as he settled back against the pillows. Might as well be comfortable, he mused. He sure as hell wasn't going anywhere, not in his present state of undress.

He was sitting there, his arms crossed over his chest, the sheet scandalously low on his hips, when she returned. She carried a large bowl of oatmeal mush in one hand, a delicate china cup and saucer in the other.

Rachel came to an abrupt halt as she entered the room, her eyes flaring at the sight of Tyree propped up in bed. The sheet, barely covering his loins, looked very white against his swarthy skin.

She took a deep breath, determined not to let him know how strongly the sight of his naked chest appealed to her.

"Shall I feed you?" she asked, each word dripping ice water. "Or can you manage on your own?"

"I thought you said solid food," Tyree growled, eyeing the oatmeal with obvious distaste.

"This is solid enough for a man who's had nothing but beef broth in his belly for nearly a week," Rachel retorted. "Take it or leave it."

Scowling, Tyree accepted the bowl, grimacing as he swallowed a spoonful of oatmeal.

Rachel studied him openly while he ate. His face was hard and unyielding, his eyes cold and cynical beneath straight black brows. There was a wary tenseness about him now that he was fully conscious, a kind of hunted animal alertness, as if he were waiting for a trap to be sprung.

Setting the bowl aside, Tyree met Rachel's frank gaze with one of his own. "I ate my

mush like a good boy," he said with a wry grin. "But I draw the line at tea."

"Would you prefer coffee?"

"I'd prefer whiskey."

"I'm afraid you'll have to settle for coffee," Rachel said firmly. Collecting his dirty dish and the untouched cup of tea, she glided out of the room.

Tyree stared after her, his expression dark with anger and frustration.

When the woman returned, a sturdy old man accompanied her. "I'm John Halloran," the old man said, extending his left hand. "I guess you know my daughter, Rachel."

John Halloran was tall and straight, with hair the color of iron and skin that resembled old saddle leather. His right shirt sleeve, empty from the elbow down, was tucked inside his pant's pocket. His grip was firm as they shook hands.

Halloran's bright blue eyes twinkled merrily as he noticed Tyree staring at his empty shirt sleeve. "Lost my arm in a cattle stampede years ago," he remarked good-naturedly. "But I'm better now. How about you?"

"Much better. I'm obliged for your hospitality."

"Glad to help out, though Rachel, here, has to take most of the credit. I, uh, don't believe I caught your name."

"I don't believe I gave it, but you can call me Smith."

"On the run, eh?" Halloran surmised,



chuckling. "Well, rest easy, Smith. We're a long way from any real law out here." He glanced briefly at the gun lying on the table beside the bed. "You any good with that iron?"

Tyree shrugged. "I usually hit what I aim at."

John Halloran nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, I reckon you do at that. Well, an extra gun might come in handy," he muttered cryptically, and ambled out of the room, his bushy white eyebrows drawn together in a thoughtful frown.

When they were alone, Rachel asked, bluntly, "Are you wanted by the law, Mr. Smith?"

"Listen, lady," Tyree answered testily, "I'm obliged to you for taking care of me, but my status with the law is none of your business."

"I don't think I like you," Rachel retorted, her sky-blue eyes flashing fire.

"Not many do."

"And you like it that way, don't you?" Rachel observed intuitively. "Ever since I came in here this morning, you've done your best to be unpleasant. Why? What are you trying to prove?"

"You're a nosey brat," Tyree muttered. "Didn't your old man teach you not to pry into other people's affairs?"

Rachel recoiled as if she had been slapped. "Pardon me," she said, the frost on her words an inch thick and rising. "I'll not pry into your personal life again." And drawing her dignity

around her like a cloak, she left the room.

Tyree stared after her for a long time, mentally cursing her for taking his clothes. He couldn't very well go parading out of the place wearing nothing but his boots and a smile. Damn the woman! Why didn't she mind her own damn business and let him mind his?

He slept away the rest of the morning, dutifully accepted the thin beef broth and fresh baked bread the woman served him for lunch, and politely asked for seconds.

Mollified by Tyree's sudden appetite and subdued manner, Rachel brought him a second slice of bread still warm from the oven along with his soup. She also offered him a cup of hot black coffee modestly laced with brandy. She tidied up the room while he ate, ever aware of his eyes on her back.

"I'm sorry for this morning," Tyree said after awhile. His voice was gruff, giving Rachel the distinct impression that he was unaccustomed to apologizing for either his words or his actions.

"I'm sorry, too," Rachel said, smiling.

"You and your old man run this place alone?"

"Just about. Job Walsh and the Apaches have scared off most of our hands."

"Walsh?"

"He owns the Slash W Ranch just east of here. It's the biggest spread in this part of the territory."

"And he wants this place, too."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"It's an old story," Tyree said shrugging. "You must have a pretty good piece of land if Walsh wants it."

"Yes. Do you know Walsh?"

"I know the type."

"Then you know what we're up against."

"I know you're a fool."

"I beg your pardon."

"You heard me. You're out of your mind if you're bucking the Apaches on one hand and a land-grabber like Walsh on the other."

"That may be!" Rachel replied curtly. "But our roots are here, on the Lazy H. My mother and my little brother are buried here. We're not leaving."

"Suit yourself. It's no skin off my ass."

"No, it isn't!" Rachel snapped crossly, and stalked out of the room, slamming the door soundly behind her.

John Halloran smiled fondly at Rachel as she moved about the spacious kitchen preparing their dinner. She was a lovely young woman, every inch a lady despite the rugged life she led. He was proud of her quiet beauty, proud of the way she carried her share of the work load without complaint, proud of her inner strength and character.

*We did ourselves proud, Ellen,* he mused to himself. *Proud indeed!*

"He's wanted by the law, you know that, don't you?" Rachel said irritably. She was still



angry with the man who called himself Smith. His language and his arrogance were beyond belief. "We've no business keeping him here any longer."

"Another day or two won't hurt," Halloran countered mildly. But Rachel was right. The man was obviously on the run. He had that hunted air about him, that wary alertness common to all hunted creatures, be they man or beast.

"I don't like him," Rachel muttered, spreading a red and white checked cloth over the table.

"He'll be moving on soon," Halloran said. Rising, he poured himself a cup of coffee from the big black pot that was always simmering on the back burner of the stove. "I wish I could—"

"Could what?" Rachel asked suspiciously.

"Nothing, nothing," Halloran answered quickly. But the thought lingered in his mind. The man calling himself Smith might be a wanted man, a dangerous man, but he could definitely be an asset to the Lazy H. He had gunman written all over him, and a good fast gun was something the Lazy H desperately needed.

John Halloran's thoughts were temporarily interrupted as Rachel put dinner on the table. She was a good cook, he mused, but then Rachel had always excelled at anything she put her mind to.

They made small talk about the ranch dur-

ing dinner. It was Rachel's habit not to discuss anything unpleasant during meals and Halloran obliged her. Thus, the time they spent dining together was always a time to relax and enjoy one another's company because, besides being father and daughter, they were good friends.

Rachel smiled at her father as he filled his plate a second time. It amazed her that he never gained any weight, for he ate enough for two hearty men. He was a rare and warm human being, she thought fondly. Despite the harsh land and their never-ending troubles with Job Walsh, her father remained a gentle man with a kind heart and a good soul.

Laying her fork aside, Rachel prepared a plate for Smith. She dreaded the thought of seeing him again. It made her uncomfortable, just being in the same room with him. He was, she decided, the most aggravating man she had ever met.

She felt his eyes on her face the minute she entered the room. The force of his gaze made her uneasy and two bright spots of color appeared in her cheeks.

"Smells good," he drawled.

Wordlessly, Rachel placed the tray on the bedside table. Her whole attitude screamed that she did not appreciate his presence in her house.

"Sorry I didn't die," Tyree muttered irritably. "It would have saved you a lot of extra work."

"Yes, it would have," Rachel agreed. "I'll be back later for the tray."

Tyree scowled as she swished out of the room. Never had any woman looked at him with such loathing. He attacked his food with a vengeance, admitting, grudgingly, that she was a hell of a good cook.

In the kitchen, Rachel put the last of the dinner dishes away, then joined her father in the den for a game of checkers. It was the best part of the day, a time for sharing the day's problems, a time when decisions were made, ideas exchanged.

A knock at the front door interrupted their game. John Halloran opened the door cautiously, frowned as he invited his visitors inside.

The voice of the fat territorial marshal penetrated Logan Tyree's dream, waking him instantly. Eyes closed, Tyree listened while John Halloran assured Marshal Brody that no one answering Tyree's description had been seen on the Lazy H.

"But you're welcome to search the place if you've a mind to," Halloran offered.

In the back bedroom, Tyree held his breath as he waited for the marshal's reply.

"No need," the lawman responded gruffly. "But if he comes sniffing around, you shoot first and ask questions later. He's a hired gun. A killer."

"A killer?" There was genuine alarm in Rachel's voice.



"Yes, ma'am," Brody said. "A cold-blooded murderer. Gunned down two men in a Texas whorehouse for no reason at all some years back. Never even gave 'em a chance to draw. Killed a man here in Arizona, too. And that's just three of many."

In the bedroom, Tyree had a mental picture of the worried glances passing between Halloran and his daughter, and his hand closed over the .44 lying under his pillow. Would Halloran turn him in, now that he knew he was harboring a fugitive?

Tyree's eyes probed the dusky room. The window was the only way out of the house other than the door, and while he didn't particularly relish the prospect of running off into the night stark naked, he would do it if he had to because, by damn, he wasn't going back to prison!

"He sounds quite desperate," Rachel said anxiously.

"Yes, ma'am, damn desperate," the marshal replied, warming to his subject. "And lucky to boot. We lost his trail out in the desert a couple weeks back, but we figured he'd head south for the border, so we trailed in that direction. We were circling back when a sand-storm caught us. Damned if it no sooner blew over than a handful of redskins run off with our horses. Damn savages! Took us three days to walk to the Bar J for fresh mounts. Three damn days! If I ever catch that bastard, Tyree, he'll pay for those three days."

"Well, we'll keep our eyes peeled for him," Halloran said sincerely. "You can be sure of that."

"Pa—"

"Later, Rachel," Halloran said. "You and your men are welcome to spend the night in the bunkhouse, marshal. You'll be comfortable there. It's the first building on the left."

"That's mighty kind of you," Brody said. "Evening, ma'am."

"Breakfast is at six," Rachel said. "You and your men are welcome to join us."

"We'll be there."

Rachel turned angry eyes on her father as she closed the door behind the marshal and his posse.

"Pa—"

"Hush, daughter."

"I will not hush. And I will not have that dreadful man in this house another night."

"You wanna turn a sick man over to a lawman like Elias Brody? Why, I'll bet Tyree would never make it back to Yuma alive."

"That's not our concern."

"Isn't it? He's a human being, Rachel. It's not for us to judge him."

"Oh, Pa," Rachel murmured helplessly. "You should have been a preacher."

Halloran chuckled. "Maybe. Let's go check on our patient."

Tyree was sitting up in bed when Rachel and her father entered the room. The .44 was nestled in his right hand, aimed in the general

direction of the door. Rachel could not help thinking the gun looked right at home in Logan's Tyree's calloused hand.

"That's two I owe you," Tyree drawled.

"You heard?" Halloran asked, dropping down onto the foot of the bed.

"Enough. I'm obliged to you for not turning me over to the marshal. Fat Ass never takes his prisoners in alive."

"I've heard rumors to that effect," Halloran remarked, glancing pointedly at Rachel.

"I don't care," Rachel muttered defensively. "The man's an escaped convict, and we're breaking the law by having him here."

"I don't want to discuss it now, daughter," Halloran said sternly. "Why don't you go get us some coffee?"

Rachel left the room without another word, her mind in a whirl. She had heard of Logan Tyree. He was a gunslinger, a known assassin, reported to have killed at least a dozen men in cold blood. Even here, in their small town, his reputation was well-known. It was rumored that he sometimes killed for money and sometimes just for the sheer love of bloodletting and violence. Dear Lord, Logan Tyree!



## *Chapter 2*

The days passed slowly for Tyree. He chafed at lying idle day after day, but his protests fell on deaf ears. Rachel was an efficient, cool, competent nurse. She anticipated his wants, satisfied his needs, made him as comfortable as humanly possible. But she adamantly refused to let him get out of bed.

"Dammit!" Tyree fumed one afternoon, exasperated by her stubbornness. "I know you're anxious to be rid of me, so why not just give me my clothes and let me get the hell out of here?"

"Because I don't want your death on my conscience," Rachel retorted. "You're too weak to walk to the front door, let alone ride

across country alone. You still have a bit of a fever, and you're not getting out of that bed for another five days."

Another five days, hell, Tyree mused irritably. He had already spent close to two weeks in bed and that was enough for any man. Another five days would have him climbing the walls.

Later that afternoon, Tyree slipped out of bed and began pacing the floor. Rachel, damn her, had been right as rain, he thought dourly. He was weak. And his side hurt like the very devil. But he closed his mind to the pain and continued to walk up and down the length of the room, silently cursing Rachel all the while. Damn the woman for always being right!

He had never been fond of small spaces and being confined in Halloran's guest bedroom, comfortable as it was, was almost as bad as being shut up in the Yuma hotbox. . . .

He had spent ten days in that hellish contraption, and he had been naked as a newborn babe then, too, Tyree mused ruefully. You couldn't lay down in the hotbox. You could only stand erect hour after hour, or squat on your heels. Or kneel, if you had a mind to pray. But nobody had ever prayed his way out of the box. You stayed inside until the warden decided you had learned your lesson; stayed, baking in the desert heat as the temperature soared to over a hundred and ten degrees. Stayed, shivering from the cold as the mer-

cury plummeted to below sixty in the dead of night.

Some men died in the box. Some went crazy, but Tyree had managed to cling to his sanity, though ever afterward he harbored a strong aversion to small, closed-in spaces. . . .

He paced the bedroom floor a few minutes at a time several times a day, and when he wasn't pacing, he often stood at the window, staring hungrily at the timbered hills visible beyond the western boundary of the Lazy H. And sometimes he just watched Rachel as she worked in the flower garden that bloomed alongside the house. She raked and weeded and pruned at least a couple of times a week. It was a purely pleasurable way to spend half an hour, Tyree mused, because for all her stubbornness, Rachel Halloran was a mighty pretty woman, especially when the sun danced in her golden hair, reminding him of a painting of the Madonna he had seen one time down in Santa Fe.

Damn the woman! He knew she disliked him. Knew she could not wait until he rode out of her life, and yet she refused to give him his clothes so he could go. Frowning, he fingered the heavy growth of beard on his jaw.

He was standing at the window that evening, entertaining some decidedly unpleasant thoughts about the perverse nature of some women, when the bedroom door opened and Rachel stepped into the room bearing his dinner on a tray.



She came to an abrupt halt just inside the door. Tyree had shaved off his beard and she could only stare, openmouthed, at the change the razor had wrought.

"Afternoon, ma'am," he drawled, making no effort to conceal his nakedness. "Sorry I'm not dressed for company."

She stared at him blankly for a moment, so enchanted with the change in his appearance she had not even noticed he was nude.

"Please cover yourself," Rachel said, feeling her cheeks grow hot.

"Afraid I don't have a thing to wear," Tyree said, smothering a laugh. "Somebody took all my clothes."

"Please use the sheet," Rachel implored, unable to draw her eyes from his face. He looked so different. Not handsome, exactly, but still very attractive in a rugged sort of way. His face was totally masculine, even without the beard. She was glad he had not shaved off his moustache. It drooped lazily over his upper lip, giving him the look of a Barbary pirate. His jaw was firm and square, his mouth wide, sensual. She wondered, with shame, what it would be like to press her lips to his, to have that soft moustache tickle her lip.

Tyree chuckled softly as he pulled the sheet from the bed and wrapped it around his waist.

Rachel placed the tray on the bedside table, careful not to meet Tyree's mocking gaze. Darn him! He was laughing at her because she had no one to blame for Tyree's nudity but

herself. He had asked for his clothes at least a dozen times.

Hoping to hide her discomfort, Rachel snapped, "What are you doing out of that bed?"

"Getting some exercise," Tyree snapped back, annoyed by her shrewish tone. "I'm going crazy, cooped up in this room."

Something that might have been compassion flickered in Rachel's lovely blue eyes and then was quickly gone. "Candido's wife made dinner tonight," she said stiffly. "I hope you like Mexican food."

She was backing toward the door as she spoke. Coming to an abrupt halt, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin defiantly. He wasn't going to intimidate her. Not in her own home.

"I'll be back later to pick up the tray," she announced icily, and walked out of the room feigning an outward calm that was sorely at odds with her inner turmoil.

A sudden burst of masculine laughter shattered Rachel's serene facade and she felt her cheeks flame again. Darn him! He seemed to know her every thought.

Tyree found his clothes neatly piled at the foot of his bed the following morning, and he grinned wryly, wondering if Rachel had decided he was well enough to get up and ride on, or if returning his clothing was just her way of making sure she didn't walk in and find

him strutting around the way nature had made him.

He dressed slowly, careful not to make any sudden moves. His left side was stiff and a little sore and he winced as he bent over to pull on his boots, noting, as he did so, that someone had given the leather a nice shine.

He was stuffing his shirttail into his pants when he heard voices. Angry voices. Shoving the .44 into the waistband of his pants, he moved noiselessly down the hallway to the front door where he stood out of sight, listening.

“—last offer, old man. Take it or leave it.”

“Be reasonable, Walsh,” John Halloran replied in a conciliatory tone. “You know darn well I can’t—”

“We’ll leave it, Mr. Walsh.” Rachel’s voice cut across her father’s, quick and angry. “Now kindly get off our property. And take your hired killers with you.”

Tyree peered around the front door to get a look at the man called Job Walsh. He saw a tall, powerful-looking man somewhere in his late forties. Walsh sat ramrod straight in an expensive hand-tooled saddle, his work-worn hands folded negligently over the horn. His face was deeply tanned, his eyes were a hard flat brown beneath straight black brows. Eight riders flanked him. Like wolves in sheep’s clothing, they were gunmen all, masquerading as cowhands.

“I’m getting almighty tired of haggling with



you people," Walsh growled impatiently. "I'd advise you to reconsider my offer while you still can."

Rachel stepped to the edge of the front porch, her head high, arms akimbo. "Is that a threat, Mr. Walsh?"

Walsh shrugged elaborately. "Take it any way you like, missy, but next time I come, I might just have to—"

"Have to what?"

John Halloran smiled broadly as Logan Tyree stepped outside, one dark-skinned hand resting lightly on the butt of the Colt jutting from the waistband of his pants.

Job Walsh swore softly. "Looks like you've gone and hired a killer of your own," he muttered, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Rachel replied haughtily, but there was a faint touch of guilty color in her cheeks.

"Don't play Little Miss Innocent with me," Walsh retorted crossly. He stabbed a fleshy finger in Rachel's direction. "What I want to know is, where did you get the money to hire a professional slinger like Logan Tyree?"

"You heard the lady," Tyree interjected smoothly. "Take your men and ride out of here."

"Sure, sure," Walsh said amiably. "But this ain't over yet. Not by a long shot."

Walsh was mounted on a flashy palomino stallion with a snowy mane and tail. The stud had stood quietly during the heated discus-

sion but now, as Walsh sank his spurs into the stallion's golden flanks, the horse reared up on its hindquarters and whirled around, then pranced out of the yard. Walsh's men trailed behind him, like smoke.

All but two. Eyes hard and calculating, they measured Logan Tyree, wondering. And Tyree measured them. No words were spoken. Indeed, the three men might have been carved from granite. Taut seconds stretched into minutes. Once, Rachel started to speak, but the touch of her father's hand on her arm kept her mute.

The tension grew unbearable and Rachel glanced anxiously at her father, hoping he would do something to break the grating silence, but he was staring at Tyree and the Walsh gunmen. Rachel felt her eyes drawn in that direction, too. Once, she sent a quick glance down the road to where Job Walsh and the rest of his men sat their horses. But no help appeared to be forthcoming from that quarter, either.

Rachel could not say when it began. She heard no words, saw no signal, but suddenly three hands were streaking for three guns. The slap of flesh upon walnut and ivory gunbutts was very loud in the oppressive stillness. Two gunshots shattered the eerie silence, the second shot coming hard on the heels of the first so that the two shots blended into one long, rolling report. And both of

Walsh's gunmen went down, dead before they hit the ground.

Job Walsh did not move. His mouth thinned into a tight white line as he stared at Tyree.

The men backing Walsh reacted like a single being as six hands hovered over six revolvers.

Logan Tyree's cold yellow eyes darted swiftly from man to man, challenging each one in turn. "Anybody wanna buy into this hand?" he asked.

There were no takers.

"You killed 'em," Walsh growled, gesturing at the two bodies sprawled in the dirt. "You bury 'em."

Rachel stared after Walsh and his men as they rode out of sight. Then, eyes filled with accusation, she focused her attention on Tyree. "I thought you said you didn't know Walsh?"

Tyree shrugged. "Didn't think I did. Last time I saw him, he was calling himself Jacob Warner."

"I see. Well," she went on briskly. "You seem to be feeling much better."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I trust you'll be riding on then." She glanced at the two men lying dead in the yard. "The sooner, the better as far as I'm concerned."

"Hold on, daughter," Halloran snapped. "This is still my place, and I'll decide who



stays and who goes. Tell me, Tyree, just how high do your services come?"

"Pa!" Rachel stared at her father in disbelief. Surely he didn't mean to hire Tyree!

"Depends on what you want me to do," Tyree replied, ignoring Rachel's shocked expression.

"I think you know," Halloran murmured, and his voice was suddenly old and tired.

"Walsh," Tyree said flatly.

"Yes. How much?"

"For you? Five hundred dollars, a hundred in advance, and the loan of a horse."

"Done," Halloran said quickly, as if he were afraid he might change his mind if he gave the matter any thought.

"Pa, you can't do this."

"Rachel—"

"You're hiring a killer, a man who's already wanted by the law."

"I know what I'm doing," Halloran replied. He did not sound very happy about it, only resigned.

Rachel shook her head, unable to believe he meant to go through with it. "Pa, please reconsider. No good will come of this."

"Rachel, that's enough," Halloran admonished sharply. "I know what I'm doing."

Rachel was sullenly silent at dinner that night, refusing to be drawn into the quiet conversation between her father and Logan Tyree. Job Walsh and his nightriders were the

main topic of discussion, as they had been between Rachel and her father nearly every day and night for the past six months, ever since Walsh's men started riding roughshod over the Lazy H.

In the beginning, Walsh's hired guns had only roughed up the Halloran cowboys. But when that failed to scare off the hired help, Walsh's men began shooting the Lazy H riders out of the saddle. A few were killed outright. Those who recovered drew their pay and quit; the remaining cowhands refused to ride the open range. As a result, most of the Halloran herd had been run off, either by Walsh's men, or by the Apache, who were not averse to eating beef when nothing else was available. The last straw had come only a few weeks earlier when the Lazy H foreman had come home tied face down across his saddle, dead from a bullet between the eyes. That night, two thirds of the remaining cowhands quit, and Joe Cahill took over as foreman. Now there were only five men left on the payroll, and less than 300 head of cattle where there had once been thousands. Three hundred cattle that were scattered across miles of broken grassland.

"Pa, how could you hire that awful man?" Rachel demanded later, when they were alone in the house.

"Honey, what else can I do? Cahill and the others are no match for Walsh's men. And Lord knows I'm too old to strap on a gun and

go after Walsh myself. Who else is there? You?"

"There's Clint."

"Clint Wesley is a fine young man, Rachel, but he's just a town marshal. Job Walsh would gobble him up and spit him out. Anyway, we've got no proof that Walsh's men are killing our cattle, or backshooting our cowhands. And Clint needs proof, not just an old man's say-so."

"Then we'll get proof."

Halloran laughed softly, hollowly. "Where are we gonna get proof that will hold up in court? Walsh and his men have got more alibis than ticks on a hound. Dammit, Rachel, we can't afford to lose any more cattle."

"But a hired killer?"

"I know, honey. It sticks in my craw, too. But I just don't know what else to do."

Rachel could not sleep that night. The clock in her room put the hour at just after midnight when she slipped out of bed, pulled on her robe, and tiptoed out of the house.

Outside, a cool breeze whispered over the face of the land, talking softly to the leaves of the trees that shaded the sunny side of the house. The sky was a cloudless indigo blue, the full moon as cold and yellow as Logan Tyree's eyes. Tyree! How she despised him!

With a sigh, she rested her elbows on the porch rail, suddenly glad that her mother, always so frail and gentle, was not alive to see what was happening. Ellen Halloran had been



a wonderful, sweet, kind soul, but she had not been a fighter. She would have been appalled by the killings and the bloodshed. She would have insisted they sell the ranch to Walsh and move on rather than stay and fight it out. And perhaps, if her mother was still alive, her father would have done just that. As it was, he didn't have the heart to pick up and start over again somewhere else.

"Nice night."

Rachel whirled around, startled to find Logan Tyree sitting in the shadows at the south end of the porch, an unlit cigar dangling from the corner of his mouth. He had gone into Yellow Creek earlier in the day and had come back mounted on a rangy chestnut mare. He had bought himself a new rifle, too, and a change of clothes. Now, dressed all in black from his shirt to his boots, Rachel thought he looked like the angel of death. It was, she decided, an apt description considering his line of work.

"Care for a drink?" Tyree asked, gesturing at the bottle of Forty Rod on the floor at his feet.

"No."

"It'll help you sleep."

"I don't need anything to help me sleep, thank you," Rachel replied curtly.

Tyree grunted softly, his eyes mocking her. The fact that she was out on the porch at such a late hour was proof enough that she could not sleep.

Tyree's shirt was open and Rachel's eyes were drawn to his bare chest. The sight of his naked flesh and the dark hair curling there did odd things to the pit of her stomach. Too clearly, she remembered tending him when he had been hurt and unconscious. The memory of his flesh beneath her hands made her palms tingle and for one mad, impulsive moment she was tempted to reach out and caress the hard wall of Tyree's chest. But, of course, she did no such thing. Instead, she folded her arms across her breasts and tried to look at ease.

The rocker squeaked loudly as Tyree reached for the whiskey bottle. It was nearly empty and Rachel glanced at his face, wondering if he were drunk.

Tyree stared back at her, his face impassive, a glint of amusement dancing in his cat's eyes. She was afraid of him, and they both knew it.

"I've been puzzling over how you managed to get out of Yuma," Rachel remarked, hoping to dispel the heavy silence between them. "I've never heard of anyone escaping from there before."

"I killed two of the guards and ran like hell," Tyree replied evenly.

"Killed them?" Rachel repeated thinly. "In cold blood?"

"Yes, ma'am. And I'd have killed a hundred more to get out of that hellhole."

Rachel stared at him, unnerved by the ease with which he talked about killing, as if shoot-

ing down a man was of no more consequence than swatting a fly.

"I can't believe it," she murmured. "I simply can't believe my father hired a . . . a murderer like you."

"There isn't another like me," Tyree muttered sardonically. There was a brief flare of light as he put a match to his cigar.

"I can believe that!" Rachel retorted caustically. "Tell me, Mr. Tyree, do you always charge five hundred dollars for your . . . your services?"

"No, ma'am," Tyree snapped back. "I usually charge a hell of a lot more."

"Oh? And just what is it that makes you worth so much?"

"I'm good at what I do," Tyree answered flatly. "Damn good."

"So I've heard," Rachel said with a sneer. "They say you killed an unarmed man in Nogales. And shot one in the back over in El Paso. Even killed a widow woman in Tucson. Burned her house down while she was still inside."

A wordless sound of disgust erupted from Tyree's throat. "Where'd you hear all that?"

"It's common knowledge," Rachel answered disdainfully.

"It's a pile of shit, is what it is," Tyree countered mildly. "I'll admit I've done a lot of rotten things in my time, but gunning down an unarmed man isn't one of them. And as for that story about killing a helpless woman . . .



Oh, hell, believe what you want to believe."

"Do you expect me to believe those stories are lies?" Rachel asked incredulously. "All of them?"

"Lady, I don't give a damn what you believe."

"They say you hire your gun out to the highest bidder," Rachel mused aloud. "Regardless of who's right or who's wrong."

Tyree shrugged. "A gun doesn't know right from wrong."

"That's true," Rachel agreed, her voice thick with contempt. "But a man does. Tell me, Mr. Tyree, would you murder my father if Job Walsh topped his offer of five hundred dollars?"

She had made him genuinely angry now. His face, usually passive, was suddenly dark with unspoken fury.

"You really do have a low opinion of me, don't you?" he muttered. "You really think I'd gun down your old man after he took me in?"

"Yes. No. I don't know," Rachel stammered, and turned away from Tyree to stare out at the land that rose and fell in gentle swells, like waves upon the sea. Overhead, the moon was bright in the sky, bathing the ranch in silver-dappled shadows. The sweet scent of sage and honeysuckle filled the air as the wind shifted and she drew in a deep breath. She loved this land. Loved the wild untamed mountains that rose in lofty splendor to the

east; loved the stark unfriendly desert that touched the southern border of the Lazy H; loved the ranch that was the only home she had ever known. With Walsh out of the way, the Lazy H would prosper again, and life would be good, as it had been before.

The thought of Walsh brought Logan Tyree to mind again. She did not like Tyree. She did not like him and she did not trust him. But her father was right. There was no one else they could turn to. They had to fight Job Walsh on his own terms, distasteful as that might be, or lose the ranch. It was as simple as that. Walsh was like a malignant disease, slowly eating away at the heart of everything she held dear, and Logan Tyree was the cure. Still, she could not help wondering if the cure might not prove more deadly than the disease itself. And yet, with Walsh gone, his hired guns would move on. The Slash W would go to Walsh's sister in Amarillo. Perhaps then they would have some peace.

She would be glad when it was all over and done, she thought wearily. Glad when Tyree was gone. Funny, how she just naturally assumed he would kill Walsh when the time came, when in all likelihood it would be Logan Tyree who died. Job Walsh was a cautious man, one with many enemies. He rarely left the Slash W and when he did, he always took his bodyguards with him. Walsh would know, the minute he saw Tyree, that

her father had hired him. And why. Tyree would be shot on sight, and the Lazy H would be no better off than it was now. Maybe worse.

She heard the squeak of the rocker as Tyree stood up.

"Why aren't you married?" he asked.

Rachel turned to face him. "What?"

"I asked why you're not married."

"Maybe the right man hasn't asked me yet."

"Who's the right man? Wesley?"

"What do you know about Clint?"

Tyree shrugged. "Nothing. Your old man mentioned him one night is all. You sweet on him?"

"Maybe," Rachel allowed, smiling mysteriously. "It's none of your business."

"What's he like, this Wesley?"

"He's tall and handsome," Rachel said, her voice going soft and dreamy. "He's honest, kind, thoughtful. A gentleman."

"All the things I'm not," Tyree muttered sardonically.

"Yes, you could say that."

"Where is he, this paragon of virtue?"

"Out of town."

Tyree muttered a mild oath. He did not like the unexpected rush of jealousy that coiled around his insides when he thought of Rachel in the arms of another man.

Rachel swallowed hard as Tyree came to stand beside her. There was a hungry look in his deep amber eyes and she took a quick step



backward, her heart pounding like a wild thing as every nerve in her body grew taut. She had never given Tyree the slightest encouragement; had never said or done anything to make him think his advances would be remotely welcome, and yet she knew he intended to kiss her.

The thought of Tyree's mouth on hers made Rachel's knees go weak, and even then he was reaching for her. Time seemed to stand still and Rachel was suddenly acutely aware of everything around her: the wind rising out of the north, the crickets singing in the trees, the scent of horse and leather and cigar smoke clinging to Tyree. Her breathing was shallow and erratic, and she felt her whole body grow warm, as if her blood had turned to flame.

Answering some inner prompting, Rachel swayed toward Tyree, all her senses urging her to surrender to the promise dancing in his eyes, to discover, once and for all, the eternal mystery of mating.

Tyree's hand was big and brown, unexpectedly gentle as it caressed her cheek and the slender curve of her throat, slipping around to cup her head in his hand to draw her closer. A killer's hand . . . the thought smothered the fire in Rachel's veins.

With a wordless cry of self-disgust for what had almost happened, she twisted away from Tyree's imprisoning hand and ran for the safety of her room. Inside, she slammed the

door, but she could not shut out the sound of Tyree's sardonic laughter.

Tyree spent the rest of the week familiarizing himself with the lay of the land. He rode the borders of the Slash W ranch, acquainting himself with every hill, gully, and ravine, memorizing landmarks, determining the quickest route between the Lazy H and the Walsh spread. He noted the best places to take cover, in case going to ground became a necessity, and looked for places where he could make a stand if things got tight.

He spent several mornings on a hilltop overlooking the Walsh ranch house, taking special interest in the armed guards who patrolled the yard at odd hours. He made note of the daily routine of the cowboys, and of Job Walsh, who never left the ranch proper without several heavily armed escorts.

It was tedious work, but it had paid off for Tyree in the past. Hunting a man was a lot like hunting an animal. It was easier to bring your quarry down if you knew his tracks, his habits, and where he made his lair. Most animals tended to eat and drink and hunt at the same time each day. Likewise, most men followed a certain pattern in their daily living.

Rachel and her father never questioned Tyree about his frequent absences from the ranch. But as the days went by, both father and daughter grew noticeably more tense. It

was like sitting on a powder keg, knowing the fuse had been lit, but not knowing exactly when the explosion would take place.

It was Halloran who finally broke the silence. "When?" he asked Tyree at dinner one night. "When will you do it?"

"Tomorrow morning," Tyree answered calmly. "Right around ten o'clock."

Tyree's absence went unremarked at the breakfast table the next morning. Halloran and Rachel both knew where Tyree had gone, and why. Halloran sat alone at the big wooden table, fingers drumming absently on the red checked cloth while Rachel prepared breakfast. He was usually a hearty eater, but this morning he had no appetite at all for the ham and eggs and biscuits Rachel placed before him and, after pushing the food around on his plate for several moments, he gulped down a quick cup of coffee and stomped out the back door.

With a sigh, Rachel threw her own breakfast to the dogs, then filled the kitchen sink with hot water, wondering how a man like Tyree operated. Did he just ride in and shoot his victims down in cold blood, or did he give them a fair chance?

Rachel grinned ruefully at the thought. A fair chance indeed. That was funny. Against the speed of Tyree's draw, a fair chance was really no chance at all, and though she har-



bored no love for Job Walsh, she shuddered to think of his being shot down as if he were of no more importance than a pesky varmint.

Leaving the kitchen, Rachel wandered aimlessly from task to task, unable to concentrate on the simplest chore until, at last, she took up a basket of mending and went to sit on the front porch. Even then, her thoughts were at the Slash W. In her mind's eye she pictured Tyree riding up to the big white house. Saw him warning Walsh to stay away from the Lazy H. Saw Walsh's gunhawks rise to the challenge. Saw them go down in a hail of lead from Tyree's Colt. Saw Walsh go down, last of all . . .

John Halloran was also finding it difficult to concentrate on the tasks at hand. Doubts and second thoughts crowded his mind as he considered the consequences of what he had done. He had bought a man's death for five hundred dollars, with no guarantee that the man who died would be Walsh. A sudden cold fear washed over Halloran with the realization that, should Tyree be killed, Walsh would come after the Lazy H with a bloody vengeance. Hiring Tyree had seemed like such a good idea at the time, but now it seemed wrong, so very wrong.

Finally, like Rachel, Halloran stopped pretending that this day was like any other and joined her on the front porch. Face drawn, he stared at the land he was trying so desperately

to hang onto. Acres of good grazing land stretched away as far as the eye could see. Large, well-built corrals were situated below the house; two corrals for holding stock, a third for breaking and branding young horses and cattle. Behind the house, a large barn sheltered a half-dozen horses, including his own buckskin gelding and Rachel's dainty bloodbay mare. Adjacent to the barn was a large tack room. And beyond that, a storage shed for tools and the like. A small graveyard stood on a grassy knoll behind the smoke-house.

The ranch house itself was a fairly large, two-story structure built of wood and native stone. It featured a large parlor, a spacious, sunlit kitchen, a formal dining room—because Ellen had wanted one so very much—and three good-sized bedrooms. He remembered how thrilled Ellen had been when the house was finally finished. Nights, they had sat on the front porch, listening to the crickets and holding hands as they dreamed of filling the house with children. Strong sons and beautiful daughters. But after Rachel there had been no children for a long time. And then, when Rachel was ten, God had blessed them with a son. But Tommy had lived only a few short years. There had been no more children after Tommy, and Rachel became dearer than ever.

Lost in thought, Halloran stared at the

whitewashed crosses that marked the final resting places of his wife and son. If only Ellen were still alive. He needed to talk to her, needed to ask her advice. She had been a quiet, sensible woman, wise beyond her years, endowed with a keen insight into other people's thoughts and actions. Always, when he had needed to make a decision, he had first discussed it with Ellen.

Halloran glanced at Rachel. She was absorbed in mending one of his shirts, and he smiled at her fondly. She had Ellen's incomparable beauty, but the resemblance ended there. Ellen had been a quiet woman—serene, peace-loving. But Rachel was a fighter and could be as stubborn as an Army mule. She would never agree to sell out to Walsh, he knew that without question, and the thought gave him strength. By damn, they would hang onto the Lazy H come hell or high water, and if Logan Tyree couldn't whip Job Walsh, then, by thunder, they'd find someone who could!

It was shortly after noon when Tyree rode into the yard. Dismounting, he hitched his horse to the rack, climbed the porch steps to stand hipshot against the railing, thumbs hooked over his gunbelt. His grin was cold as glacier ice as he remarked, tonelessly, "Walsh won't be giving you any more trouble."

The words hung in the air like a death knell. For a moment, Rachel and her father stared at



each other, speechless. Then, with a small cry of dismay, Rachel ran into the house.

"I don't think your daughter approves of your methods," Tyree remarked dryly.

John Halloran recoiled as if he had been slapped. Now that Walsh's death was an accomplished fact, he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt at what he had done.

"Neither do I," Halloran muttered brokenly. "Dammit, Tyree, neither do I."

Rachel and Tyree crossed paths in the kitchen later that day. Rachel's lovely deep blue eyes burned with bitter contempt when she looked at Tyree, and her mouth thinned into a cold line of disapproval.

Walking past her to the stove, Tyree poured himself a cup of coffee and sipped it slowly. The tension between them was so strong, he would not have been surprised to see sparks dancing across the room.

Rachel's flagrant, if unspoken, contempt annoyed Tyree more than it should have, and he slapped his coffee cup down on the table, ignoring the fact that the contents sloshed over the rim, making a dark brown stain on the freshly laundered red-checked cloth.

"All right, spit it out," he growled. "What's eating you? The fact that I killed Walsh, or the fact that your old man hired me to do it?"

Rachel turned on Tyree with all the fury of a treed cougar. "Both, if you must know," she

lashed out angrily. "I cannot condone murder, not even the murder of a man like Job Walsh."

Tyree shook his head in genuine amazement. "Well, I'll be go to hell! The man was out to steal your ranch, and now you're crying because he's dead."

The contempt in Rachel's eyes turned to pity as she stared at Tyree. "You don't hold life very dear, do you, Mr. Tyree?"

"Only my own, Miss Halloran," he fired back.

"And does your life make you happy?"

"Happy?" There was a note of bewilderment in his tone.

"Yes, happy. Do you like the man you see in the mirror when you shave?"

"I don't use a mirror," Tyree muttered, frowning at her.

"You know what I mean," Rachel said crossly. "Don't be obtuse."

"Obtuse? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means thickheaded," Rachel explained in a syrupy voice. "Slow to comprehend."

"Thanks."

"You haven't answered my question," Rachel reminded him.

Tyree laughed shortly and without amusement. "What the hell difference does it make to you whether I'm happy or not?"

"None," Rachel answered with a shake of her head. "None at all. Well, I suppose you'll

be moving on, now that you've earned your blood money."

"First thing in the morning," Tyree assured her, and stalked angrily out of the room.

Late afternoon found Tyree sitting on the porch steps, absently chewing on the end of a long black cigar, content, for the moment, just to sit back and stare out into the distance. It was good to be free, he mused. Good to have a belly full of food that wasn't rancid or half-raw. Good to feel the weight of a Colt .44 riding his hip. Tomorrow he would ride on, heading north. Perhaps he would spend the rest of the year with the Apache. Perhaps he would ride on to Virginia City and try his hand at the gaming tables. Perhaps not. He had never been one to plan ahead, and he saw no need to start now. The money he had earned for gunning Walsh made a comfortable bulge in his hip pocket. Blood money, Rachel had called it. And that was sure as hell what it was. But it would take him wherever he wanted to go. He glanced around the ranch yard, surprised to discover he didn't particularly want to leave the Lazy H. Or Rachel. He grinned wryly. Especially Rachel. No matter that she thought he was dirt. He did not want to leave her. What he wanted was to kiss her pouty red mouth until she admitted she wanted him as much as he wanted her. She could yell she hated him, insist she loathed his touch and



despised everything he stood for, but the attraction between them was real.

He touched a match to his cigar as the screen door creaked open and John Halloran stepped out onto the porch.

"Tyree?"

"Yeah."

"Does my five hundred bucks entitle me to one more favor?"

"Depends," Tyree answered with a shrug. "Who do you want killed now?"

Halloran grimaced as though in physical pain. He would never know another peaceful night's sleep as long as he lived, he mused bitterly. Not if he lived to be a hundred.

"I don't want anyone killed," the old man answered thinly. "Rachel went riding an hour ago, and she hasn't come back yet. She hates it when I worry about her, but . . . dammit, Tyree, it'll be dark soon and she's all I've got left in the world."

"Yeah. Don't worry, Halloran, I'll find her."

Rising to his feet, Tyree sauntered down to the corral and caught up the chestnut mare he had bought in Yellow Creek. Rachel would be less than pleased when he showed up on her trail, he thought with some amusement, but what the hell. It was a nice night for a ride, and he had nothing better to do.

The mare was eager to run and she responded to the touch of Tyree's heels with a toss of her head as she broke into a comfortable lope. In moments, the ranch was left

behind and they were riding across open country.

The tracks of Rachel's fine bloodbay mare were as clear as glass, and Tyree followed them with ease, frowning as her trail veered southward toward Sunset Canyon. Damn fool girl, he muttered under his breath. Didn't she realize she was heading straight into Apache country?

Three miles later he crossed a dry wash and picked up the tracks of five, maybe six, unshod ponies trailing after Rachel.

Tyree swore softly as he rolled a smoke. The land was flat here, crisscrossed by shallow draws and gullies and box canyons. The ground was soft, but not too soft to hold a print, and the tracks left by Rachel and the Indians were deep and easy to follow.

Lifting the chestnut mare into a slow trot, Tyree swore again as he passed the place where Rachel first realized she was being followed. Frightened, she had lashed her horse into a run and the Indians had quickly given chase. It had been a short flight. The Indians had swiftly overtaken her, and now one of the braves was leading her mount.

A stand of heavy timber loomed ahead, and Tyree reined the chestnut to a halt. Dismounting, he tethered the mare to a cottonwood, slipped out of his boots, and padded forward on cat feet, rifle in hand.

Pausing, he listened for some sound that would pinpoint the whereabouts of the Indi-

ans. Seconds later, a woman's frightened squeal rose in the air.

Drawing a deep breath, Tyree picked his way through the underbrush. He moved as quietly as a mountain lion stalking its prey, careful not to step on any twigs or dry leaves that would betray his presence. A clearing appeared some yards ahead, and he caught his first glimpse of Rachel and the Apaches.

Rachel was spread-eagled on the ground between four grinning Apache bucks. Her blouse was ripped, giving a tantalizing glimpse of creamy flesh. Her skirt and pantallets were bunched around her hips, revealing long, shapely legs. A fifth warrior was stripping away his clout, and the sight of his swiftly rising manhood caused Rachel to increase her struggles.

Tyree scowled as one of the warriors stuffed a dirty red kerchief into Rachel's mouth to stifle her cries.

"She has breasts like the Chiricahua Mountains," declared the brave pinning Rachel's left arm down.

"And I am going to climb them," boasted the naked warrior with a lusty chuckle. "Move over and give me some room."

Tyree mouthed a vague obscenity as he jacked a round into the breech of the rifle. The harsh metallic sound, unmistakable for what it was, quickly caught everyone's attention.

Hope flared in Rachel's red-rimmed eyes as she recognized Tyree. If anyone could get her



out of this mess, Tyree could. For once she was glad he was hard and cruel and handy with a gun. He would know what to do.

The four warriors surrounding Rachel sat unmoving, their expressions slightly sheepish, like children caught playing doctor behind the barn.

The naked warrior smiled broadly as he glanced past Tyree, and Tyree felt the muscles tighten in the back of his neck as he realized there had indeed been six Indian ponies, not five, and that the sixth Indian was now standing behind him. The sudden jab of a gun barrel against his spine came as no surprise and Tyree dropped his rifle with an air of grim resignation.

The warrior behind Tyree laughed softly. "You are smart, for a white man. Drop your gunbelt, too."

"Six horses," Tyree muttered disgustedly. "I must be getting light in the head."

The Indian behind Tyree came around to face him, and Tyree swore under his breath as he recognized the broad, ugly face of Many Eagles, one of the lesser chiefs of the Mescalero Apache.

"Is this any way to treat a brother?" Tyree demanded angrily.

Many Eagles snorted derisively. "I have no white brothers," he said disdainfully. "Only enemies. Dead enemies."

"You have one white brother," Tyree retorted boldly. "I saved your life seven sum-

mers ago, in Palo Duro Canyon. And yours, too, Standing Buffalo."

A quick smile spread over the face of the naked brave. "Tyree! I did not recognize you without your face hair."

"I recognize you, Standing Buffalo," Tyree replied dryly. "Even without your clout."

The naked warrior laughed heartily, and the four warriors holding Rachel grinned as they exchanged ribald comments in soft guttural Apache.

"Go now, Tyree," Many Eagles said gruffly. "I give you back the life you once gave me."

"Not without my woman," Tyree said firmly. "Or my weapons."

"It is well-known among the Apache that you have no woman," Many Eagles countered. "She lies dead and buried along the Gila, proof of the white man's treachery."

"She has been long dead," Tyree answered tonelessly, surprised that her memory still had the power to cause him pain. "I have taken another woman."

"I do not believe you." It was evident, from the tone of the chief's voice and the look in his eye, that he wanted Rachel for himself.

"She is my woman," Tyree said again. "Ask her if you do not believe me."

Many Eagles shook his head. "Words prove nothing. She fights like a mare not yet broke to the saddle. If you are truly her man, she will let you mount her without complaint."

Tyree glared at the Indian. "It is not our

way to lie together for the amusement of others."

"You will do it," Many Eagles insisted, "or I will keep her for my own once my warriors have tired of her."

Tyree scowled blackly, his eyes intent on the face of the Apache chief. Was the Indian serious, or merely bluffing? Would Many Eagles truly take Rachel, or was he playing games to see how far Tyree would go? There was no way to be certain, and Tyree wasn't prepared to call the Indian's bluff, not when Rachel's future was at stake.

He gazed at Rachel. He could not blame Many Eagles for coveting her. Even now, begrimed with dust and sweat, her eyes swollen with tears, she was a sight to take a man's breath away.

With an effort, Tyree drew his gaze from Rachel's heaving breasts and long, shapely legs. "Hear my words, Many Eagles," Tyree growled. "I will do as you say, but I tell you now, if our paths cross again, I will cut out your heart and feed it to the coyotes!"

Without waiting for the warrior's reply, Tyree strode toward Rachel. Reaching down, he took the gag from her mouth, gestured for the Indians holding her to move aside.

Freed of the restraining grasp of the warriors, Rachel sat up, her eyes intent on Tyree's face as she drew her skirt over her legs.

"What's going on?" she queried tremulously. "What are they going to do to us?"



"That depends on you," Tyree said, hunkering down on his heels beside her. His teeth flashed in a wry grin, confusing her still more.

"On me? I don't understand."

"Well, it's like this," Tyree explained. "I told Many Eagles over there, that you're my woman. He's an old friend of mine, but he doesn't believe me. He wants proof."

"Proof?" Rachel echoed, puzzled. "What kind of proof?"

Tyree's dark amber eyes flickered over Rachel's comely form, causing a slow flush to spread from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes as she read the answer to her question in Tyree's gaze.

"No, never," she whispered, vigorously shaking her head. "I'd rather die!"

"Suit yourself," Tyree replied with a shrug. "Only dyin' ain't in the cards, at least not for you." His voice went suddenly hard and flat. He did not like the idea any more than she did, but it was the only way for both of them to survive, and the sooner he could make her understand that, the better. "You'd better face facts, honey. You've only got two choices: me or them."

"What kind of choice is that?"

"Not much, I reckon. But if you refuse me, Many Eagles is gonna kill me for lyin' to him. And when his bucks are through with you, you'll probably wish you were dead, too."

"No," Rachel whimpered plaintively. "No, no, no."

"Well, like I said, it's up to you."

"But I hardly know you," Rachel wailed inanely, and Tyree chuckled.

"You don't know them, either," he reminded her with a rueful grin. "But you will. Intimately."

It was like a nightmare, Rachel thought in despair. Worse than a nightmare. And whether she was ravaged by six leering savages or one cool-eyed gunslinger didn't really matter. The results would be the same. Her reputation would be ruined, her virginity gone.

"Will they let us go, after?" she asked.

"I don't know," Tyree answered honestly. "But there's only one way to find out."

"But I've never . . . I mean, I'm still—"

Tyree swore irritably. "You tryin' to tell me you're still a virgin?"

It sounded like a sin, the way he said it.

"Well, you won't be much longer," Tyree drawled matter-of-factly, and a faint hint of amusement danced in his amber eyes as he stood up and unbuckled his belt.

"This can't be happening," Rachel thought numbly. But it was. As though hypnotized, she watched Tyree undress. His hands were big and brown and they moved purposefully and without haste as he removed his pants. He didn't wear longjohns like most men and she gasped aloud as he stood partially naked before her, his skin as dark as the skin of the leering Apaches.

"Lie down," Tyree said curtly.

Sucking in a deep breath, Rachel did as bidden. The dirt was hard beneath her, the sky above a brilliant blue. She stared at the setting sun, trying to separate her mind from what was happening to her body.

Tyree threw Many Eagles a venomous glance; then, feeling like some sort of damned sideshow freak, he lifted Rachel's skirt and removed her pantalets. Muttering an oath, he lowered himself over her, acutely aware of six pairs of ebony eyes watching his every move.

Rachel's body jerked and went rigid as Tyree's bare legs touched her own. With a small cry, she closed her eyes, her hands tightly clenched at her sides.

"Relax," Tyree whispered.

"I can't," Rachel retorted. "I'm too scared."

"Yeah. Well, this is going to hurt you a hell of a lot more than it does me, but whatever you do, don't fight me. This has got to look like just another roll in the hay between old married folks."

Rachel's eyes snapped open, anger and indignation blazing in their depths. "Must you be so crude?"

"Sorry, honey," Tyree said lightly. "Now, put your arms around me like a loving little wife and let's get this stupid charade over with."

Reluctantly, Rachel placed her arms around Tyree's neck. His dark hair was soft



against her hands, the muscles in the back of his neck taut with anger and desire as he drew her close.

She was frightened, more frightened than she had ever been in her life. Of the Indians. Of Tyree. He was stroking her arms lightly, kissing her eyes, her cheeks, the tip of her nose. Every instinct urged her to fight him, to preserve her chastity, but her fear of the Indians was stronger than her desire to remain chaste and she closed her eyes again, praying it would soon be over.

Tyree felt his desire rise swift and hot as he caressed Rachel's arms. She was sweet, so sweet, and he had wanted to make love to her for so long. But not like this.

He heard the Indians ride away as he kissed Rachel, felt the tension drain from his body as his lips slid over Rachel's closed eyelids. So, Many Eagles had been bluffing after all. Reluctantly, he drew away from Rachel. Letting her go was the hardest thing he had ever done, and he regretted it immediately. But violating virgins was something he'd never done, and he didn't intend to start now.

Rachel's eyes flew open as Tyree took his mouth from hers. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

"They've gone."

She glanced around, her eyes wide with fear, her body shaking visibly. She was so scared, and so cold. She looked at Tyree. He

was so brave. And his arms looked so strong and warm. Without conscious thought, she reached out for him, needing to be held. He had come to her rescue. He would protect her, shelter her from harm. In the face of fear and danger, he was all that was solid and familiar.

Tyree let out a long sigh as Rachel's arms slid around his neck. She was shivering violently and he held her close, his arms wrapped around her, his lips moving in her hair as he whispered words of comfort.

In that moment, she forgot that she hated him, forgot everything but the security of his arms and the consoling warmth of his body pressed to her own. She lifted her head, her lips seeking his. He hesitated for a moment, and then he was kissing her, his mouth moving over hers slowly, languorously, his tongue darting out to savor her lower lip. It was a wondrously heady sensation, and totally unexpected. She tried to remind herself that he was an outlaw, but even that didn't seem to matter, not now, with his mouth on hers and her blood turning to fire. Tyree caressed her and she responded in kind, her hands slipping under his shirt to roam over his broad back and shoulders, reveling in the feel of his scarred flesh beneath her fingertips.

All her fears fled as Tyree made love to her, answering a need she had not known she possessed. She had been cold and afraid; now she was warm and alive, every nerve-end



tingling, every inch of her skin attuned to his touch.

Tyree tried to hold back, tried to resist, but her lips were so sweet, her arms so welcome. He vowed each kiss would be the last. Just this one, and he would let her go before it was too late, before he could never let her go. Just one more . . .

His tongue slid into her mouth, kindling new fires between them. Rachel groaned with pleasure, her arms drawing Tyree closer, her body pressing against his. Not realizing how she was affecting him, she knew only that she wanted to be closer. Her tongue caressed his, then slid shyly into his mouth, and it was too late to turn back.

His yellow eyes were ablaze with desire when he thrust into her. Rachel uttered a little cry of pleasure and pain as his body melded with her own, making her forget everything but the wonder of his touch as wave after wave of ecstasy flooded her being, filling her with delight, until she lay sated and spent in his arms.

Later, she lay silent and ashamed beside him, wracked with guilt. What had she done? Always, in the back of her mind, she had imagined it would be Clint who would initiate her in the ways of love. They would be married, of course, sheltered within the cosy darkness of their own little house. She would be shy, hesitant, and yet eager to explore the intimate secrets shared by a man and a wom-



an. Clint would be strong and tender, pleased with her inexperience, proud that she had saved herself for her husband . . .

She shook her head and the idyllic images faded. She had ruined all that now, ruined any chance she might have had for a life with a decent man. How could she have given herself to Tyree? How could she have let him make love to her out in the open like some kind of primitive savage? Shame flooded her cheeks with color. She was ruined now, soiled. Moments before, the loss of her virginity had seemed a small price to pay for the security and pleasure of Tyree's touch. Now, as harsh reality set in, she realized the cost. No respectable man would want her now. Damaged goods, they would say, and turn away in disgust.

Abruptly, she burst into tears.

Tyree drew a long breath and blew it out slowly. He had wanted to make love to Rachel ever since the day he had first seen her bending over him, her vibrant blue eyes filled with concern, and he was a man who generally got what he wanted, one way or another. Nonetheless, he was aware of a sudden wave of remorse for what he had done. No matter that she had practically asked for it, no matter that she had been scared and in need of comfort. Rachel Halloran was a nice girl, much too nice for the likes of a drifting gunhawk like Logan Tyree. He had not bedded a decent woman since he left the lodges of the

Mescalero. He had taken his pleasure in cheap cribs and cantinas, slaking his carnal desires with whores who didn't need sweet words and gentle wooing to satisfy a man's hunger. Rachel was not a harlot to be used and forgotten, no street girl to be paid a few dollars and cast aside.

He slid a glance in her direction, wanting to apologize, to say something that would ease the pain in her heart, but words would not come. If only she had not put her arms around him. If only she had not kissed him back. He might have been able to let her go but for that. And yet, he should have held back anyway. Difficult as it would have been, he should have stopped.

Cursing softly, he stood up and pulled on his pants. The Indians had taken Rachel's mare, he noted with a shake of his head. But better the horse than the woman.

Rachel sat up as her tears subsided. Reaching for her pantalets, she drew them on, then stood up, drawing her skirts down over her thighs, brushing the dust from her dress. The sun had gone down and the darkening sky was stained with brilliant slashes of crimson, like the faint smears of blood that stained her thighs.

She flinched as Tyree laid a hand on her shoulder. "Don't touch me," she said. "Don't you ever touch me again."

Tyree cocked an eyebrow at her, surprised by the venom in her voice.

"You cad!" she hissed. "I never want to see you again."

"Now just a damn minute," Tyree growled angrily. "You wanted it as much as I did."

"That's a lie!" Rachel cried, her cheeks flooding with color. "It was all your fault. You knew I'd never had a man before. You took advantage of me."

Tyree swore under his breath. "I took advantage of you? I think you might have that just a little bit backwards."

"I do not!" She stamped her foot, hating him because he was right and she was wrong. But she simply couldn't admit she had wanted him. It was so much easier to blame him than admit the truth.

"Like hell. You were hotter than a July firecracker and now you're too damn gutless to admit it."

"I hate you." She spoke the words through clenched teeth, meaning them. And then all the anger went out of her as she thought of going home again, of facing the people she knew and loved.

Lowering her eyes, she said, "Promise me you won't tell my father about this. Not my father, or anyone else."

"You mean Wesley, I guess," Tyree muttered irritably.

"I mean anyone!" Rachel snapped crossly.

But she did mean Clint. What would he think of her if he found out what she had done, and with whom? Would he still look at



her as if she were the sweetest, most wonderful girl in the world, or would he turn from her in disgust, his mild blue eyes filling with revulsion?

As if reading her thoughts, Tyree muttered, "No one's ever gonna know what happened here today, so quit worrying about it."

"I'll know," Rachel replied quietly. Indeed, it was something she would never forget.

John Halloran was waiting for them on the front porch, a worried expression on his weathered face.

"Everything all right?" he asked anxiously. His eyes sought Tyree's. "Where's Rachel's mare?"

"Your daughter had a little run-in with the Apache," Tyree answered, stepping down and lifting Rachel from the saddle. "They took her horse."

"Apaches!" Halloran exclaimed. "Rachel, are you all right?"

Rachel moved away from Tyree, her eyes not meeting her father's. "I'm fine, Pa," she said flatly. "Just fine."

Halloran's glance skittered back and forth between his daughter's wan face and Tyree's grim expression. There was something they weren't telling him, something they were both holding back, but what? He watched Rachel as she slowly climbed the steps and disappeared into the house.

"Are you sure she's all right, Tyree?"

Halloran asked dubiously. "She looks . . . upset."

"She's got a right to be upset. She had a bad scare, but she'll be fine after a good night's sleep."

"You're a handy man to have around," Halloran remarked, somewhat relieved by Tyree's assurance that Rachel was unhurt. "Think you could stay on for a few more days, just to make sure we've had our last run-in with the Slash W bunch?"

"Sure," Tyree said, though he knew Rachel would be less than pleased to have him underfoot. "I've got no place to go, and no one waiting for me when I get there."

## *Chapter 3*

With Walsh's death, life on the Lazy H soon returned to normal. Cahill and two of the cowhands rode out into the hills to round up what strays they could find, leaving the remaining two men to mend the fences Walsh's men had torn down and patch up the outbuildings that had fallen into disrepair.

Three days later, Cahill and his men returned with better than sixty head of cattle. These were driven into the holding pens behind the barn and for the next couple of days, the stench of scorched cowhide and the bawling of unhappy cattle filled the air as calves long overdue for branding were cut out of the herd and marked with the Halloran brand.

From his place on the front porch, Tyree



took it all in, marveling that Halloran's hired hands would work so hard for so little pay. Why, he had made more money in two weeks killing rustlers down in the Panhandle than these men would make in a year of range work. And he had made it with far less effort, Tyree mused as he watched a bowlegged cowboy throw a bawling calf to the ground while a second wrangler laid a hot iron against the animal's flank.

Off in the distance, Joe Cahill and a freckle-faced cowboy were perched on the top rail of a fence, taking a break while they watched Candido try to break a flashy gray stallion to the saddle. From the way the men were hollering and carrying on, Tyree figured the bronc was winning.

Yeah, the place was jumping all right, no doubt about that. Inside the house, he could hear Rachel singing softly as she swept the parlor floor. She had a pleasant voice, Tyree thought. But then, everything about Rachel was pleasant. Everything except her attitude toward him.

She did not like the fact that he sat idle while everyone else worked, and she said so, openly, bluntly, and often.

"You could at least help water the stock," she had remarked earlier in the day. "Or feed the chickens."

"I could," Tyree had replied easily. "But your old man ain't paying me to tend his stock."

That remark had unleashed a tirade that had gone on for several minutes and had ended only when Tyree dropped a hand over Rachel's mouth, cutting her off in mid-sentence.

"Why don't you just calm down and admit what's really bothering you?" Tyree had suggested.

"I don't know what you mean," Rachel had replied stiffly.

"The hell you don't! You're still in a lather about what happened at Sunset Canyon, and we both know it."

Rachel had thrown Tyree a withering look. Then, head high as a spooked filly, she had turned on her heel and flounced angrily into the house, her cheeks awash with color.

That had been better than an hour ago, and though she had been in and out several times since then, she had never acknowledged Tyree's presence on the porch by so much as a glance. Oh, she was mad all right, he mused. No doubt about that.

Tyree spent the whole day loafing on the porch, content to sit in the shade with his hat tilted over his eyes, his long legs stretched negligently in front of him, his arms folded over his chest.

Rachel burned every time she saw him sitting there, catnapping or smoking a thin black cigar while everyone else toiled in the sun. There was so much to be done, and so few hands to do it. There were still stray cattle

to be rounded up, calves that needed branding, fields to plow, hay to cut, fences that needed mending, stock to be fed and watered, harness that needed repairing, wood to cut. And there was a large hole in the kitchen roof that simply had to be patched before the rains came.

Oh, there were a hundred things that needed doing and one more pair of hands would be welcome, even the hands of a gunslinger like Logan Tyree. But no, he could not be bothered with anything as mundane as manual labor.

"Too bad we don't have another land-grabber for him to kill," she muttered crossly. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind adding another notch to his gun."

His gun. That was another area of contention. He never took it off, not even at the dinner table, and that irritated Rachel more than anything else. She had asked him, politely, to please remove his gunbelt during dinner, but he had refused with a curt, "Sorry, no."

He had usurped her father's place at the head of the table, too, offering no apology or explanation. Later, her father had pointed out that Tyree insisted on sitting at the head of the table because it put his back to the only wall in the room that didn't have a window in it, and afforded a clear view of the door.

"Self-preservation, honey, that's all it is," Halloran had explained. "You can't blame a



man for being careful. Especially a man in Tyree's line of work."

Tyree. He stayed up long after everyone else had retired for the night. Often, from her window upstairs, Rachel saw the faint glow of his cigar as he took a last turn around the house, or paced the length of the front yard. Dressed all in black, with his cigar casting eerie shadows across his swarthy face, she often thought he looked like Satan prowling the bowels of Hell. Not a pleasant comparison, she admitted, but then, Logan Tyree was not a particularly nice person. Arrogant, yes. Self-assured, yes. But pleasant? Definitely not!

But what bothered Rachel the most was her father's attitude toward Tyree. Somehow, her father had resolved his feelings of guilt regarding his part in Walsh's death and seemed to have thrust the matter behind him. He never mentioned the incident and seemed to have forgotten it ever happened.

Not only that, but her father seemed to have developed a genuine fondness for Tyree's company and the two of them spent many an evening discussing the ranch, debating whether it would be wiser to take their small herd to market this year, or wait until the following spring.

Rachel was bewildered by Tyree's attitude, as well. She knew he cared little for the ranch, or for the problems facing them, yet he listened patiently while her father waxed long and loud about his hopes for the Lazy H. On

occasion, Tyree even offered worthwhile suggestions. Men! There was no understanding any of them.

As time went on, there was considerable speculation about what would become of the Slash W ranch now that Walsh was dead. There was talk in town that an eastern syndicate was thinking of buying the place. Another rumor concerned a Scotsman and a flock of sheep. There was even mention of some English lord coming out to look the place over, but Rachel dismissed such talk as idle gossip. Most likely, Walsh's sister, who lived in Amarillo, would sell the Slash W to some nice family man with a dozen kids and that would put an end to the trouble in the valley once and for all.

Sunday found Tyree slouched in his usual place on the front porch, an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth, his hat pulled low. Rachel was inside singing "Nearer, My God, to Thee" while she dressed for church. Halloran was down at the barn, talking to Cahill while one of the hands hitched a pair of spirited bay geldings to a shiny black buggy.

The ranch was quiet today. Candido had already left for town, bound for mass. The freckle-faced wrangler was going courting. You could always spot a cowhand with romance on his mind. They were squeaky clean and usually smelled heavily of lilac water.

Tyree pushed his hat back on his head as Rachel opened the front door and stepped out



onto the porch. She looked lovely, as always; her face was lightly powdered and a few tendrils of golden hair peeked out from beneath the brim of a perky straw bonnet. Her slender figure was modestly clad in a dress of some dark blue material trimmed in delicate white lace. The dress outlined every luscious curve. Just looking at her made his mouth water.

Rachel frowned as she stood on the edge of the porch, waiting for her father to bring the buggy up from the barn. Why did Tyree have to be sitting on the porch just now, she wondered dourly. It was a beautiful morning and she didn't want anything, or anyone, to spoil it. She was reluctant to acknowledge his presence. The sight of his lip curling down in that hateful way made her angry; but it was his amused silence that goaded her into speaking.

"Good morning, Mr. Tyree," she said coldly, formally. She glanced toward the barn, wishing her father would hurry.

"Mornin', ma'am," Tyree drawled. As usual, she was ill at ease in his presence. Her face mirrored her relief when Halloran drove up in the buggy.

"Morning, Tyree," Halloran called cheerfully. "Care to come to church with us?"

"Now what would I do in church?" Tyree asked, flashing a sardonic grin.

"Well, now—" Halloran began, only to be cut off in mid-sentence by his daughter.

"You could pray for the souls of all the poor



unfortunate men you've gunned down," Rachel suggested sweetly.

"You must have a hell of a long service," Tyree replied easily. "I've killed a lot of men."

Rachel stared at Tyree, her face pale, her eyes filled with condemnation. What kind of monster was he, to talk so casually about the men he had killed? Didn't he feel any remorse, any guilt or regret, at taking a human life?

The horrified look on Rachel's face sparked Tyree's anger. Who was she, to sit in judgment on him? When had she ever known anything but love and security? What did she know about him, or his past? What did she know about pain?

"A lot of men," Tyree repeated, some perverse quirk of nature urging him on. "Widows and orphans, too," he added sourly. He was kidding, of course, but Rachel took him seriously, and that angered him still more.

"Maybe you should say a prayer or two for your own soul," Rachel murmured quietly, her voice filled with pity. "Though I doubt it would do much good at this late date."

John Halloran cleared his throat as the tone of their conversation grew heavy. "Rachel, that's enough."

"I'm sorry, Pa. Mr. Tyree." Lifting her skirts, she hurried down the steps to the side of the buggy.

She was about to step in when two strong

hands closed around her waist. "Allow me, ma'am," Tyree said with exaggerated politeness, and before Rachel could protest, he had lifted her onto the high front seat as though she weighed no more than a sack of feathers.

"Thank you," Rachel said through tight lips.

"Sure you won't join us?" Halloran asked. "We've plenty of room."

Tyree was about to refuse when he glanced at Rachel. She was sitting stiff as a board beside her father, her cheeks suffused with color, her hands folded primly in her lap. She refused to meet his eyes.

Tyree grinned roguishly, knowing his company was the last thing she wanted on this bright sunny morning.

"I think maybe I will join you after all," Tyree decided, and climbing into the rig, he took a place next to Rachel.

It was a lovely morning for a ride, but Rachel found no pleasure in it. The flowers growing alongside the road might have been weeds, the sky overhead black with clouds instead of a clear sapphire blue. Trapped between her father and Tyree, she stared straight ahead, furious with them both. Men! Whatever had possessed her father to invite a man like Logan Tyree to church? And what in the name of all that was holy had prompted Tyree to accept?

As the miles slipped by, she grew increasingly aware of Tyree's hard thigh pressed

against her own, of the touch of his arm jostling hers whenever the buggy bounced over a rut in the road. Almost as tangible as the pressure of his arm and thigh was the bold way his eyes caressed her, making her blush with embarrassment. His holster was a hard lump against her hip, a constant reminder of who and what he was. How she hated him! He was the most arrogant, insufferable man she had ever known.

"It's good to have things back to normal," her father mused as they pulled onto the main road that led to town. "Cahill thinks we might have enough cattle to make a decent herd come spring."

"He's a good man," Tyree remarked. "Handy with a rope."

John Halloran ran a nervous finger around the inside of his shirt collar, knowing Rachel would not take kindly to what he was about to suggest. "Tyree, I'd, uh, like to have you stay on with us. Permanent."

"Pa!" Rachel exclaimed in horror. "You can't be serious."

"Don't worry, ma'am," Tyree said smoothly, his voice quietly mocking the despair in her eyes. "I've no intention of settling down and becoming a farmer. But I'm obliged for the offer, Halloran."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Rachel glanced at her father out of the corner of her eye. What was he thinking of, to ask Tyree to stay on at the ranch? Dear Lord, what



would she have done if Tyree had accepted? There was no way she could face him every day. His presence was a constant reminder of something she longed to forget, and only the fact that he would soon be riding on made his presence bearable. Every time she looked at him, she knew he was remembering Sunset Canyon. The knowledge of what had happened between them was always lurking in the back of his eyes, tormenting her, taunting her. She could hardly bear to look at him.

The Yellow Creek Methodist Church was a small square flat-topped building crowned with a large wooden cross. Saguaro, ocotillo, Spanish bayonet and palo verde grew around the church, their leaves and flowers making bright splashes of color against the white-washed walls. Buggies, wagons, and riding horses were tethered to the long hitch rail in front of the building.

Hat in hand, Tyree followed Rachel and John Halloran into the church and down the narrow aisle to their pew, which was located near the front of the chapel. He should not have come, Tyree mused glumly. He had only agreed to accompany them to annoy Rachel, after all, and not because of any deep burning need to hear the gospel preached by some whey-faced minister who had probably never seen sin close-up, or known how satisfying a bottle of good whiskey and a bad woman could be.

Several heavily corseted dowagers dressed

in somber hues turned to stare at Tyree, making him feel as welcome in their midst as a bottle of rotgut at a temperance meeting. One stout, gray-haired matron whispered, loudly, that the Lord's house was not the proper place for guns. Or gunmen.

Tyree could not have agreed more.

A hush fell over the congregation as the Reverend made his way to the pulpit to offer the invocation. It was a long prayer, filled with praise and thanksgiving for the Lord's benevolence. Tyree glanced furtively at the people sitting nearby, bemused by the rapt expressions on their faces. The nuns who had raised him had worn similar expressions of love and devotion during worship services at the convent.

Tyree grimaced as he lowered his gaze and studied the raw plank flooring at his feet. Personally, he had never found much comfort in the stilted rites and rituals of the Catholic church, or any solace in the cold pattern of their prayers, only a wondering curiosity that God did not get tired of hearing the same rehearsed prayers day after day, year after year.

The religion of the Apache had been more to his liking. Usen was the All-Father, the supreme being; Child of the Waters was His son. The Apache was one with nature, believing that every rock, every animal, every blade of grass, had a spirit of its own. Nothing was ever wantonly killed or wasted, lest its spirit

become angry. Only the white man killed for sport. He had even killed his God.

The opening strains of an unfamiliar hymn put an end to Tyree's reverie, and he listened with real pleasure as Rachel's voice joined with the congregation, the notes sweet and clear as she praised the Lord in song.

There followed several announcements relating to recent births, deaths and marriages in the community, and then the preacher began his sermon.

The clergyman was a nice enough looking fellow, with close-cropped curly brown hair, expressive brown eyes, and hands that looked as soft as a baby's bottom. There was, in fact, nothing remarkable about the man, until he began to speak. His voice was deep and rich, with a resonance that carried past the last pew. The minute the pastor began to speak, Logan Tyree knew he should have stayed at the ranch.

"My text for this morning concerns the sixth commandment," the minister said in his best hell-and-damnation voice, "thou shalt not kill—"

For the first time since leaving the Lazy H, Rachel glanced directly at Tyree. "Are you listening?" her lovely blue eyes seemed to say. "This one is for you."

Scowling, Tyree settled deeper into his seat, wondering how Rachel had managed to write the preacher's sermon.

"He who lives by the sword shall perish by



the sword," the Reverend went on, warming to his subject. "Man was not placed upon the earth to contend with his brother, but to love him, to help him in times of trouble, to comfort him in times of sorrow—"

Face dark with annoyance, Tyree managed to sit through forty-five minutes of pious mutterings before the good reverend said "Amen" and sat down.

There was another hymn, and another prayer, before the service was finally over. Stepping outside, Tyree took a deep breath. Never again would he willingly enter a church. Not even to annoy Rachel. Better to fry in hell than sit through another long-winded lecture on the evils and consequences of sin.

After church, the congregation went outside to socialize. A long gateleg table held cookies and punch. Tyree stood near the Halloran buggy, his arms folded across his chest, while John Halloran and Rachel mingled with their friends. Several young men went out of their way to speak to Rachel.

Tyree scowled as a pair of young boys clad in dark blue suits ventured in his direction, their eyes round as saucers as they stared at the gun slung low on his thigh.

"Told ya it was a Colt," bragged the older of the two.

"Jeff Barnes, you come away from there this instant!" called a female voice. "And you, too, Jimmy Norris!"

The two boys didn't move, but continued to stare at Tyree and at the tied-down gun that marked him as a gunman.

"Jeff! Jim!" The voice was shrill now with anger.

Tyree grinned. "Best run along, boys," he suggested. "She sounds mad."

Jeff Barnes shrugged. "She's always mad."

"Yeah," Tyree said, thinking of Rachel. "Some women are like that."

"Jeff! Jim!" The voice was masculine this time, and the two boys turned and ran back to the churchyard.

A short time later, John Halloran and Rachel made their way to the buggy. Rachel was careful to let her father sit in the middle on the ride home. It was a move that did not go unnoticed by Tyree.

"Fine sermon," Halloran remarked on the trip back to the Lazy H. "Preacher's got a good head on his shoulders for such a young sprout."

"Yes, indeed," Rachel agreed. "Tell me, Mr. Tyree, did you agree with what the Reverend Jenkins had to say?"

Tyree quirked a knowing eyebrow in Rachel's direction. "You mean that part about dying by the sword, I reckon?"

"Why, yes, I did," Rachel acknowledged sweetly. "How did you know?"

"Just a wild guess," Tyree answered dryly.

"Well, do you agree with him?" she persisted.

Tyree shrugged. "I suppose what he says is true. But then, everybody dies sooner or later, and a bullet's as good a way to check out as any. Better than most." He threw Rachel a lazy grin. "And it sure beats hanging."

"You talk very casually about death," Rachel remarked. "Doesn't the thought bother you? I mean, in your line of work, it could happen anytime."

"I guess I've seen death up close too many times to be afraid of it," Tyree murmured, his tone no longer light and teasing.

"What are you afraid of?" Rachel asked.

She waited intently for his answer, feeling that if she could discover what he feared, she would discover something meaningful about the enigma known as Logan Tyree. But he did not answer her. Instead, he stared into the distance, his eyes guarded, his mouth a tight line.

"Well?" Rachel urged.

"I think I can answer that one, daughter," Halloran remarked quietly. He glanced in Tyree's direction. "Some men ain't afraid of life or death. They're afraid of other things, like growing old, or being helpless. Ain't that right, Tyree?"

"Yeah," Tyree admitted slowly. "Something like that."

Rachel stared at her father, puzzled that he should have such insight into the character of a man like Tyree.

"You have a very strange outlook on life,



Mr. Tyree," Rachel mused aloud. "Very strange indeed."

"We weren't talking about life," Tyree reminded her with a rueful grin. "We were talking about death. When the time comes, I want to go out to meet it. I don't want to be too old or too stove up to put up a fight."

"Amen," John Halloran murmured fervently. "But tell me, Tyree, until the old man with the scythe shows up, what's a feller like you want out of life?"

"Not much," Tyree said, chuckling. "A good horse. A good gun. A bad woman."

"Amen again," Halloran chortled, slapping his thigh. "Amen and amen."

Rachel looked at her father, openly astonished. "Pa!"

"Don't get riled, daughter," Halloran chided, winking at Tyree. "I was only funnin'."

Funning, indeed, Rachel thought sourly. Her father's whole attitude had changed in the last few months, and she could trace the change directly to Logan Tyree!



## *Chapter 4*

*I*n the days that followed, Rachel avoided Tyree whenever possible, and when they were together, she was cold and distant. Halloran spent most of his time with his nose buried in his account books, his brow puckered in a worried frown as he pored over his ledgers. Tyree loafed on the front porch, apparently indifferent to anything that did not concern him personally.

On Saturday morning, Cahill's niece, Amy, made her weekly visit to the ranch. She was a winsome child, full of energy, and Cahill loved the child dearly, but after three hours of "what?" and "why?", he sent her down to the barn to find Candido. One of the mares had



recently dropped a foal and Cahill hoped Amy would pester the head wrangler with questions about the filly for awhile, thereby giving his own ears a much-needed rest.

But Amy could not find Candido, and so she wandered into the barn alone, excited by the prospect of playing with the baby horse.

She had to stand on a feed bucket to see over the stall door, and her eyes grew wide as saucers when she spied the long-legged buckskin filly nuzzling its dam's teat.

Amy's hand fairly itched to touch the darling foal, but both horses ignored her. The mare was content to nibble at the hay in the manger; the filly continued to suck greedily at its mother's milk.

With an exasperated sigh, Amy jumped off the bucket and kicked it aside. It took several minutes of concentrated effort before she managed to unlatch the stall door. Then, totally unaware of any danger, she stepped into the stall, smiling as her eager hands reached out to stroke the filly's neck.

Tyree was catnapping on the front porch when the mare's scream of rage shattered the afternoon stillness. Hard upon the mare's angry whinny came the terrified shriek of a frightened child. It was the girl's cry of terror that galvanized Tyree into action and he raced down the porch stairs and across the yard toward the barn, hoping he wasn't too late to save the child from whatever trouble she had stirred up.

Amy was pressed hard against a corner of the stall when Tyree arrived. Her blue eyes were round with fear, her rosebud mouth open in a soundless cry for help.

The mare was blocking the stall door, and she was mad as hell. The filly was her first foal, and the mare was as jealous and protective of her offspring as only a new mother can be. Ears flat, she snapped at the child, her big yellow teeth missing Amy's right shoulder by mere inches.

"Easy, mama," Tyree murmured. "Easy, girl."

The mare whirled around to face the new threat, her sides heaving, her teeth bared. The filly pressed close against her mother's side, frightened by the confusion in the stall.

"Easy, mama," Tyree murmured again. "Easy now. No one's gonna hurt you or that pretty baby. Easy, mama. Easy now."

The mare stared at him, ears twitching, nostrils flared.

Still speaking softly, Tyree reached out and laid one big brown hand on the mare's shoulder. Ever so slowly, he slipped a rope around the mare's neck. "Come on, mama," he coaxed in a quiet voice. "Let's go outside."

For a moment, it was uncertain whether the mare would respond to the tug of the rope and the quiet words. Snorting softly, the mare swung her head around to stare balefully at the small human creature huddled in the corner, and then the mare reached out to sniff

Tyree, who was murmuring to her in soft Apache as he gently stroked her neck.

"Mr. Tyree—"

"Be quiet, kid," Tyree admonished. Then, to the mare, "Come on, mama. Everything's all right."

With a toss of her head, the mare followed Tyree out of the stall, whickering to the foal dancing nervously at her heels.

Candido, Cahill, and Rachel were waiting outside the barn. Cahill looked hard at Tyree, his face pale, his eyes worried.

"The kid's all right," Tyree assured Cahill. "Just scared."

"Thank God!" the foreman said fervently, and ran into the barn. He reappeared a moment later with Amy cradled in his arms. "Tyree," Joe Cahill murmured sincerely. "How can I ever repay you?"

"No need," Tyree said, grinning at Amy. "I was just returning a favor. Right, kid?"

"Right," Amy said tremulously, and burst into tears.

"Tyree, if there's ever anything I can do for you," Cahill said, "anything at all—"

"Sure," Tyree answered, handing the mare's lead rope to Candido. "I'll let you know." With a smile at Amy's tear-stained face, Tyree started back toward the house.

Rachel was grinning broadly as she followed Tyree. His concern for Amy's safety was the first decent human emotion he had shown, and for some reason she did not care



to examine too closely, it pleased her immensely.

"What the hell are you grinning at?" Tyree asked sourly. "My face turning blue?"

"Better be careful," Rachel teased, "or you'll ruin your tough-guy image."

"What?"

"People might think you've got a heart under that thorny exterior if you start rescuing children in danger."

"I'll keep that in mind," Tyree retorted dryly.

Rachel laughed out loud. "Just kills you to think you were caught doing a good deed, doesn't it?" Rachel crowed. "Well, I shall remind you of it at least once a day."

"You do, and I'll knock your teeth down your lovely throat," Tyree threatened, only half kidding.

"I'm not afraid of you any more, Logan Tyree," Rachel declared boldly.

She was beautiful when her spirits were up, Tyree mused. Her cheeks were flushed a becoming shade of pink, and her sky blue eyes twinkled merrily as she walked beside him, taking long steps to keep up. Oh, she was having a high old time, needling him about his so-called good deed. There was no doubt about that.

"So you're not afraid of me any more," Tyree drawled lazily.

"That's right," Rachel answered saucily. "I used to think you were all cold steel and ice,

but now I know you're really soft as melted butter."

They were standing on the front porch now. Rachel had her back against one of the up-rights, her head tilted up so she could see Tyree's face. A curious light danced in his eyes as he took a step toward her.

"Come closer," he said, "and I'll show you just how soft I can be."

Suddenly Rachel didn't feel like smiling any more. The husky wanting in Tyree's voice sent a cold shiver down her spine and that, coupled with the hungry look in his catlike eyes, started her heart pounding like an Indian war drum.

"Never mind," she said briskly. "I believe you."

Tyree took another step forward, placing his hands on either side of Rachel's head so that she was trapped between his arms. His eyes lingered on the warm curve of her mouth, then dropped suggestively to her breasts before he returned his gaze to her face. She looked scared and very vulnerable.

"I thought you weren't afraid of me anymore," he challenged.

Rachel swallowed hard, all her bravado gone now that he was standing so near. The scent of cigar smoke and leather tickled her nostrils, reminding her of Sunset Canyon. She could not hold his inquiring gaze and she glanced at the arms that imprisoned her. His sleeves were rolled up, exposing his forearms,

and the sight of his bare flesh started a little thrill of excitement in her stomach. His black shirt was the perfect foil for his swarthy skin and ebony hair. His eyes, so intent on her face, burned with a deep amber fire.

"I'm not afraid," Rachel stammered nervously. "It's just that I . . . I have something in the oven, and I think it's burning."

"That right? I don't smell anything." He was laughing at her now, his mouth turned down in that mocking grin she hated, his eyes alight with mischief.

"Well, I do!" Rachel shrieked. Ducking under his arms, she bolted for the front door and the safety of the house.

Once inside, Rachel glanced over her shoulder, then sighed with relief. Thank goodness, he hadn't followed her. Damn the man! Why didn't he go away and leave her alone? She hated the way he looked at her whenever they were alone together, his amber eyes hungry, his mouth curled down in that mocking way she despised. She knew all too well what he was thinking when he looked at her like that; knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was remembering Sunset Canyon.

The memory of that day was indelibly burned into Rachel's memory, too, and she felt her blood grow cold as she recalled the heart-stopping fear that had taken hold of her when she realized the Indians were following her. Her flight had been in vain, and all her struggles futile. Vividly, she remembered how



frightened and humiliated she had been when they threw her to the ground and lifted her skirts, their deep-set black eyes leering at her as they held her down. She remembered how relieved she had been to see Tyree. 'Thank God, she had thought, help was on the way.

As always, she burned with shame at the memory of what she had done. She could not blame Tyree for what had happened between them. He had been ready to let her go as soon as he realized the Indians were gone, but no, she had put her arms around his neck and practically begged him to take her.

Oh, if only he would go away! Maybe then she could forget the whole thing. And yet, she didn't really want to forget. She had thrilled to his touch, to the feel of his arms around her. She had marveled at the way his body felt pressed against her own, had thrilled to the crush of his lips, to the sound of his voice whispering in her ear, telling her she was beautiful, desirable.

She was glad when Amy came in, clamoring for milk and cookies.

## Chapter 5

Early Monday morning, Tyree saddled his horse and rode into town. He had been cooped up at the Lazy H for too long, he mused, and he felt the need for a drink and a few hours of solitude at the local watering hole.

Riding down the main street, he stopped at the first saloon he came to. *Bowsher's*, the sign said, and Tyree grinned. Flat-Nose Beverly Bowsher was a name known on both sides of the Missouri. Flat-Nose had been a notorious madam in a swanky Denver saloon until she fell in love with a half-breed Apache scout. The Indian had no understanding of a woman who sold herself to men and sliced off the end

of her nose. Beverly had fled Denver and taken up residence in the quiet town of Yellow Creek. She was old now and kept to her rooms above the saloon. But her name remained a legend.

Dismounting, Tyree looped the chestnut's reins over the hitchrack, slipped the cinch, and gave the animal a pat on the neck before stepping inside the saloon. Ordering a bottle of rye whiskey from the bar dog, he carried the bottle to a rear table. Sitting there, with his back against the wall, he slowly and methodically worked his way to the bottom of the bottle, feeling his muscles relax as the pale amber liquid warmed his belly.

The saloon grew crowded as noontime approached. Shopkeepers drifted in for a quick drink after lunch. Unemployed cowhands ambled in, hoping to get a lead on a job at one of the local ranches.

Tyree studied each man that entered the saloon, sizing them up with a practiced eye. Toward evening, a pair of hardcases swaggered in, and Tyree felt himself grow tense as he recognized two of Walsh's hired guns. The Slash W riders spotted Tyree at the same time. Frowning, they stood with their heads together for a few moments before they hurried out of the saloon.

It was late when Tyree returned to the Lazy H. Only one light burned in the house and Tyree went inside expecting to find Rachel's old man asleep over his account books. In-



stead, he found Rachel curled up in a chair, reading a volume of Shakespeare.

Damned if she didn't look like some kind of golden temptress sitting there, Tyree mused, what with her tawny hair spilling over her shoulders and the lamplight softly caressing the curve of her cheek.

Rachel looked up, startled by his sudden appearance. "Mr. Tyree. We thought you had left."

"Sorry to disappoint you, ma'am, but I just took the day off."

Rachel wrinkled her nose with distaste as she caught a whiff of his breath. "And spent it at the local saloon," she muttered with obvious disapproval.

"Yeah. You got any coffee?"

"There's some left from dinner," she said grudgingly.

"That'll do. Think you could warm it up for me?"

"I suppose so." Her tone implied she was less than pleased with the thought of his prolonged presence.

"Thanks."

Tyree followed her into the kitchen, admiring her tiny waist and the supple sway of her hips.

"Would you care for something to eat?" Rachel asked, coolly polite and impersonal.

"Just coffee."

"Will you be staying with us much longer, Mr. Tyree?"

He chuckled softly. "Just can't wait to get rid of me, can you?"

"No," Rachel answered bluntly. "My father may be charmed with your presence here, but I am not. I'd like to know how much longer you plan to stay with us."

"Until your old man tells me to leave," Tyree snapped, annoyed as always by her too-obvious disaffection. "That coffee ready?"

"Yes."

Tyree took the cup Rachel offered him, swallowed the hot bitter brew. Too bad it wasn't poison, he mused wryly. That would put a smile on her face.

"Got enough for another cup?" he asked, more to irritate her than anything else.

Rachel refilled Tyree's cup without speaking, not liking the way his eyes moved over her, or the way he had maneuvered her into a corner, so that he stood between her and the door. He drained the cup, his eyes never leaving her face. She wished suddenly that she was wearing more than just a cotton nightgown and a flannel robe. Unconsciously, she drew the robe tighter around her waist.

Setting the empty cup on the table, Tyree reached out and ran his hand through the heavy mass of Rachel's hair. It was soft as cornsilk, smooth as satin beneath his fingertips. Stepping closer, he caught the faint fragrance of lavender-scented soap, the aroma of fresh-baked bread. And over all was Rachel's own scent, warm and womanly.

Muttering a soft oath, Tyree took Rachel in his arms and kissed her, his mouth hard and demanding, his lean body pressed suggestively against hers.

For a moment, Rachel stood limp in his arms, her knees suddenly weak, as if his kiss had drained all the strength from her limbs. A slow fire started in the pit of her stomach and spread downward as his hands caressed her back. She felt bereft when he took his lips from hers and she swayed against him, her face upturned, her mouth strangely eager for his kiss.

Tyree chuckled softly as he covered her mouth with his own. "Sweet," he murmured, nibbling her lower lip. "So sweet."

His breath tickled her ear as his mouth moved up her neck and against her hair. Rachel sagged against him, shuddering with pleasure as his hands kneaded her lower back and buttocks, grinding her hips against his groin, leaving her breathless and yearning for more. Her arms went around his waist, her hands roaming over his muscled back and shoulders. He was so big, so tall, so very male. All her senses responded to his touch as her questing hands moved up and down his arms, excited by the play of powerful muscles beneath the black cotton shirt he wore.

"Sweet," Tyree said again, and his hand was warm on her bare flesh as he loosened her bathrobe and dropped his hand inside her gown.



The touch of Tyree's calloused hand on her breast shocked Rachel into a sudden awareness of what she was doing, and with whom. With a squeal of alarm, she twisted out of Tyree's grasp. Two bright spots of color stained her cheeks, and her eyes blazed with anger and indignation as she slapped him with all the strength at her command.

The print of her hand stood out clearly on Tyree's cheek, as livid as the rage that flickered and died in his eyes. With a muffled cry, Rachel pushed past Tyree and headed for the door, but before she could escape, Tyree grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her backward. Trapping her within the hard prison of his arms, he turned her toward him and kissed her a third time, his tongue boldly raping the soft inner recesses of her mouth.

Rachel struggled in vain, and the more she fought him, the harder Tyree kissed her until, at last, she stood passive in his embrace. There was a dull roaring in her ears, a peculiar quivering in her limbs, and a growing desire to stand there forever, with Tyree's arms tight around her and his mouth pressed to hers, evoking wave after wave of delightfully wicked longings deep in the core of her being.

She was almost sorry when Tyree finally released her.

"Go on, slap me again," he invited impudently. "It's worth it."

The next morning, Rachel's mouth was still bruised from the force of Logan Tyree's kisses. What an arrogant, insufferable man he was! And how readily she had responded to the touch of his mouth and hands.

She was decidedly cool and aloof at breakfast, refusing to meet Tyree's smugly knowing gaze, or to be drawn into any conversation with him.

John Halloran frowned at his daughter. He knew she heartily disapproved of Tyree but, in his opinion, there was no reason to be rude to the man. Tyree was, after all, a hired hand and deserving of at least a modicum of polite attention.

Rachel was relieved when breakfast was over and the men left the house. She quickly did the dishes and tidied up the kitchen, then returned to her bedroom, intending to put the finishing touches on a new dress she was making. But as she passed the window overlooking the yard, she spied a familiar figure lounging against one of the breaking pens watching Candido throw a saddle on a bronc. Candido was a top hand with horses, and she was somewhat surprised to see he was still attempting to break the big gray stallion that had recently been brought in off the range. The stud, once king of all he surveyed, was a fighter and his ears went flat the minute he felt the weight of the saddle on his back.

With a last jerk, Candido pulled the cinch



tight and stepped into the saddle. And all hell broke loose. Ears flat, back humped, nose to the ground, the maddened stallion began bucking. Amazingly, Candido rode the pitching bronc as if glued to the saddle. The mustang bucked like a rodeo bronc, now sunfishing, now swapping ends. And when bucking failed to dislodge the unwelcome rider, the stallion reared straight up and crashed over backward. But Candido was out of the saddle before the gray hit the ground, and nimbly remounted as the angry horse scrambled to its feet.

With a shrill scream of rage, the stud grabbed the bit between its teeth and lined out in a dead run. Thinking the stallion meant to jump the corral fence, the wiry Mexican wrangler settled deeper into the saddle. But the mustang did not launch himself over the corral. Instead, he swung sideways at the last minute, slamming Candido against the stout wooden rail.

The sound of breaking bone was sharp, punctuated by a high-pitched cry of pain as Candido's right leg snapped. Sensing victory, the gray bucked again and Candido toppled out of the saddle and hit the ground, hard.

With the quickness of a mountain cat, Tyree vaulted over the fence and grabbed the mustang's bridle while a pair of cowhands slipped between the rails and dragged the luckless waddie out of harm's way.

Tyree paid no attention to the commotion



outside the corral. He had eyes only for the horse as he stood at the stallion's head, patting the animal's lathered neck and shoulder, gently scratching its ears. And all the while he was talking to the horse, and the horse was listening.

Still speaking to the horse, Tyree removed the saddle and sweat-dampened blanket, then led the skittish stud out of the corral toward the barn.

Rachel stared after Tyree, her dress forgotten. How could a man be so gentle and patient with a wild animal and callously kill a human being?

Early the following morning, Rachel saw Tyree working with the stud. From her bedroom window, she watched Tyree ease a halter over the gray's head, then pick up a light saddle blanket and let the horse sniff it. That done, Tyree rubbed the blanket over the stud's neck and withers, along its back, over its muscled rump and down each leg. Sacking out, the cowboys called it, though it wasn't a common practice. Most cowhands just saddled a bronc and rode it out, breaking the horse by sheer force. But not Tyree. Again and again, Tyree dragged the blanket over the animal, showing the nervous horse there was nothing to fear.

The saddle came next: on, off, on, off. And all the while she could see he was talking to the horse.

Fascinated, Rachel left her room and took a

place behind a tree, hoping to hear what Tyree was saying to the skittish mustang. But the words were harsh, foreign to her ears.

Tossing the saddle and blanket aside, Tyree stroked the gray's neck. And then, still speaking gently to the stud, he swung aboard the animal's bare back. There was a moment when the stallion's ears went flat, when its nostrils flared with suspicion and confusion, but Tyree was speaking to the horse again, soothing its nervousness with quiet words and gentle hands, and after a few halfhearted crowhops around the corral, the stallion stood quiet, ears twitching back and forth.

Dismounting, Tyree led the horse around the corral, first one way, then the other. A second time he swung effortlessly onto the animal's back. Dismounted once again. Then, as if he had been doing it every day for years, he saddled the gray and stepped aboard. And the mustang stood there like it had been carrying a man all its life.

"Care to try him, ma'am?"

Startled, Rachel stepped out from her hiding place. "How did you know I was here?"

"Smelled you. Wanna try him?"

"That outlaw? No, thank you!"

"He's no outlaw," Tyree said, patting the gray's neck. "He's just been mistreated, but he'll come around. You'll see. Some kind words, a light hand on the reins, and he'll be as gentle and law-abiding as your own mare was."

"Too bad those methods don't work with people," Rachel muttered dourly.

"Meaning me, I suppose," Tyree said testily.

"Exactly you."

Dismounting, Tyree led the stallion out of the corral. He grinned wickedly as he came to stand beside Rachel.

"Maybe it would work," he suggested. "Why don't you try being nice to me for a few days and see what happens?"

"I am nice!" Rachel snapped.

"Yeah," Tyree agreed, laughing softly. "Real nice. And soft-spoken, too."

Rachel felt her cheeks grow hot. He was baiting her again, trying to make her angry. And he was succeeding, damn him. Hands clenched at her sides, she took a deep breath, determined not to bandy words with Tyree this time. Smiling sweetly, she inclined her head toward the stallion. "What were you saying to him?"

"I'm not sure," Tyree answered with a shrug. "It's Apache horse talk."

"It's certainly effective."

"Yeah, works every time." His eyes searched hers, then dropped suggestively to the swell of her breasts beneath her yellow shirtwaist, and the curve of her hips. "Too bad it doesn't work as well with women."

"Meaning me, I suppose?" Rachel replied. The words, meant to sound light and teasing, emerged as a choked whisper. The look in



Tyree's cool amber eyes were doing odd things to her heart and a sudden heat, like liquid fire, ignited deep in the core of her belly as a slow smile spread over his face. Why did he have to be so disgustingly handsome, she lamented. And why did her heart behave so queerly whenever he was near? Clint's smiles didn't make her toes curl with pleasure, nor did Clint's kisses leave her breathless and longing for more.

"Exactly you," Tyree drawled softly, intimately.

For a timeless moment, they faced each other, a vibrant heat pulsing between them. Rachel stared at the man standing beside the gray stallion. He was arrogant, full of self-confidence, always so damnably sure of himself. He reminded her of the Indians that roamed the mountains. Like them, he was as wild as the wind, free as the air, deadly as a sidewinder. But there was something about Tyree that attracted her, that made her want to delve into his heart and soul and discover who he really was. Her mind told her he was exactly what he appeared to be: a ruthless killer, a man who could snuff out a human life without turning a hair. And yet, in her heart, Rachel knew he had a gentler side. She had seen the softer side of Tyree when he suspected no one was watching. She had seen his hands, so big and brown and strong, softly caress Amy's hair. Had seen him rescue a baby bird from the jaws of a hungry cat. And

she herself had felt his tenderness at Sunset Canyon.

Tyree cocked his head to one side, one black brow rising inquisitively under Rachel's prolonged gaze. What was she thinking? he wondered. What mischievous thoughts were running around inside her pretty little head? What would she do if he reached out and grabbed her trim waist and planted a kiss on that delectable mouth? Would she scream? Slap him? Run back to the shelter of the house? Or admit that she found him desirable and kiss him back?

As if reading his mind, Rachel took a step backward and crossed her arms over her breasts.

"Apache horse talk?" she said, breaking the spell between them. "Where did you ever learn such a thing?"

"From the Mescalero. I lived with them awhile back."

There was something in his tone that warned her not to ask any more questions, but they popped into her mind willy-nilly, one after the other. How long ago had he lived with the Indians? Why had he lived with them? Was that where he had learned to walk with that cat-footed grace that was so rare in big men? Was that why he was so secretive about his past? Had he ridden the war trail with the Apache? Rachel shivered in the sunlight. It was all too easy to imagine Tyree looting and killing and scalping. And liking it.

The sound of approaching hoofbeats drew Tyree's attention and he glanced over his shoulder to see a tall, blond young man ride up to the house, dismount, and look around. A smile spread over the stranger's face when he saw Rachel and he started toward her at a brisk walk.

Rachel was smiling too, her vibrant blue eyes sparkling with pleasure as she took the man's hands in her own.

"Clint," she said warmly. "I'm glad you're back."

Bending, Clint Wesley kissed Rachel on the cheek. "Did you really miss me?" he asked huskily.

"You know I did."

"How much?"

"More than I can say, Rachel answered with mock gravity, and then they both laughed, as though sharing a private joke.

Tyree studied the blond young Adonis, taking special note of the shiny six-pointed tin star pinned to the man's black leather vest, and of the .45 Colt holstered on his right hip. The gun didn't look as if it had seen much action, but it was well cared for.

Tyree glanced at the Marshal again, annoyed to see the man was still holding Rachel's hands.

"Say, Rachel," Wesley was saying, "you're still going to the box social with me, aren't you?"



"Of course," Rachel answered, dimpling prettily. "I wouldn't miss it. Can you come for dinner tonight? I know Pa would love to see you."

"Sure." Wesley seemed to notice Tyree for the first time. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Rachel said, some of the enthusiasm draining from her voice. "Clint Wesley, this is Logan—"

"Matt Logan," Tyree interjected smoothly.

The Marshal nodded, a faint look of suspicion clouding his mild blue eyes. It was a look Tyree had seen countless times before. It was a look that went with the badge.

"You a friend of the family, Mr. Logan?" Wesley asked.

"Just a hired hand."

Wesley rubbed a hand across his jaw, his eyes thoughtful. "You been in these parts before?"

"Not lately."

"Hmmmm. Your face looks familiar. Mind if I ask where you're from?"

That was another thing about lawmen, Tyree thought sourly. They were nosey as hell. "Yeah, I do mind," he said curtly. "If you'll excuse me, I'll be getting back to work."

And before Wesley could object, Tyree vaulted into the saddle and gigged the gray toward the barn.

"Not a very friendly cuss, is he?" Clint muttered.

"No. I hate him. When did you get back?"

"Just now. I haven't even been to my office yet."

"You were gone so long, I was beginning to worry about you."

Clint shrugged. "I got tied up with a bunch of red tape at the territorial prison."

Rachel nodded. If Clint hadn't been to town, then he probably hadn't heard about Walsh. But he would. And if he turned up proof that Tyree killed Job Walsh, what then? It was true that Tyree had pulled the trigger, but her father would be equally culpable before the law.

"Well, I'd better be going," Clint said reluctantly. "I've got a lot of paperwork to catch up on. Dinner at six?"

"Yes," Rachel answered absently, and lifted her face for his kiss.

Rachel prepared Clint's favorite dinner that night: roast beef, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn-on-the-cob, green beans, biscuits dripping butter and honey, and deep-dish apple pie for dessert.

"Lordy, John, I'm surprised you're not as fat as old man Emerson's hogs," Wesley laughingly remarked as he helped himself to a second slice of apple pie. "I know I would be if I ate this good every night."

"Well, it could be arranged," Halloran said, winking broadly.

"Pa, stop it," Rachel admonished. But she

slid a shy smile in Clint's direction. He looked wonderfully handsome, all decked out in a bright red shirt and brown whipcord britches. Unconsciously, she compared Clint to Tyree, who was dressed all in black, as usual. Clint was the more handsome of the two, she decided, and yet there was something earthy and sensual about Tyree that appealed to her, though she was loath to admit it, even to herself. And Tyree *was* handsome, ruggedly so.

"Did you get Curly Bob delivered to Yuma all safe and sound?" Halloran asked Wesley. "There was some talk that his gang might try to spring him."

"Never saw hide nor hair of any of them," Clint replied, chuckling. "I put the word out that I'd blow Curly Bob's head clean off at the first hint of trouble."

"Hot damn!" Halloran chortled in amusement. "I guess they knew you'd do it, too."

"I reckon. Say, I saw Walsh's sister in town this afternoon. She's a mighty pretty woman."

"She planning to sell the ranch?"

"I don't know, John. I didn't get a chance to talk to her. But judging by the amount of baggage she brought along, I'd say she's planning to stay on for quite a spell."

Halloran nodded, his face thoughtful.

"Funny thing about Walsh being bush-whacked," Clint mused aloud. "Nobody seems to have any idea who did it, or why."

Rachel glanced sideways at her father, wait-



ing for him to reply, but he was staring into his coffee cup, his mind apparently on something else.

"It was a dreadful thing," Rachel said quickly. "Tell me, Clint, did you stop to see the O'Brians on your way to Yuma? Has Molly had her baby yet?"

Tyree grinned to himself as Rachel adroitly steered the conversation to safer ground.

With dinner over, the three men retired to the parlor for brandy and cigars while Rachel cleared the table and washed the dishes.

If the Marshal thought it peculiar that Matt Logan was the only hired hand to take his dinner at the main house with the boss and to linger for brandy afterwards, he did not remark on it, though he had treated Tyree to several long speculative glances during dinner. Now, as John Halloran filled their glasses, Wesley said,

"I saw a couple of Slash W riders in town this afternoon. They seem to think somebody paid to have Walsh disposed of."

"That so?" Tyree asked disinterestedly.

"Do they have any idea who was behind it?" Halloran asked bleakly.

Tyree's face remained impassive, but John Halloran's guilt was etched across his weathered face as clearly as print on a page. But Clint Wesley did not see it. He was staring at the man called Matt Logan. Wesley's eyes gave him away even before his hand started toward his gun.

"I wouldn't," Tyree warned flatly. "Not if you expect to walk out of here."

Clint Wesley swallowed hard as he stared into the yawning maw of the .44 that had magically appeared in Tyree's hand.

"Tyree," Wesley muttered sheepishly. "Logan Tyree."

"Took you long enough," Tyree chided in a mild tone.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Wesley accused. "You gunned Walsh."

"Did I?"

"You just rode in and shot him down in cold blood."

"Anybody see me do it?"

"No."

"Too bad."

"Yeah. Well, what now? You gonna gun me down the way you killed Job Walsh?"

Tyree laughed shortly and without amusement. "You hopin' I'll make a slip and say yes? Well, forget it. I didn't bushwhack Walsh and I'm not aimin' to kill you unless you do something stupid."

Halloran had been nervously silent during the exchange between the two younger men. Now, he cleared his throat and said, curtly, "Tyree, put that gun away. I'll not have any gunplay in my home. And you, Clint, you just forget that badge for a minute and remember you're a guest in this house."

"I don't feel very welcome just now," Clint replied, rising stiffly to his feet. "If it's all the

same to you, I think I'll go bid Rachel good-night and take my leave."

Halloran and Wesley shook hands and then Clint left the room, his back rigid, as if he expected a bullet to follow him out the door.

"Damn!" The word whispered past Halloran's lips and his face was suddenly drained of color. "He knows," the old man murmured, shaking his head in dismay. "He knows."

"He doesn't know a damn thing," Tyree stated flatly. He drained his glass in a single swallow. Striding to the table where Halloran kept his liquor, Tyree poured himself another drink. "Don't worry, old man," he said calmly. "I didn't backshoot Walsh. And even if I had, there weren't any witnesses."

"I never should have hired you," Halloran said wearily. "I haven't had a peaceful night's sleep since Walsh died. Dammit, I wish I had given him the ranch!"

"Would you feel better if I told you I shot Walsh in a fair fight?"

"Did you?" Halloran asked hopefully.

Tyree grinned at the eager expression on the old man's face. "Sure I did," he lied smoothly. "Sleep easy tonight, Halloran, you've got nothing to worry about."

Halloran didn't believe him, not for a minute. But he wanted to . . . needed to, and so he nodded. "Thanks, Tyree. See you in the morning."

Stepping outside, Tyree sat on the porch



rail and rolled and smoked a cigarette. It was a cool clear night, fragrant with the scent of sage and honeysuckle. Overhead, countless stars shimmered against a black velvet sky.

Grinding out his cigarette, Tyree ambled down to the corral, smiled faintly as the gray stallion came up to him.

"Hi, fella," Tyree murmured, scratching the stud's ears. Abruptly, he whirled around, hand flashing for his gun as he heard footsteps behind him. But it was only Rachel.

"Awfully fast with that, aren't you?" Rachel remarked caustically.

"Middling. Just middling." He returned the .44 to his holster in a swift, unconscious movement that was not lost on Rachel. "The Marshal gone?"

"Yes."

"You want something Rachel?"

It was the first time he had called her by her given name. She could not explain the rush of pleasure it gave her, to hear her name on his lips.

"You want something?" he asked again.

"Yes. Your promise that you won't hurt Clint."

Tyree snorted. "I can't make a promise like that."

"Why not?"

"Because sooner or later he's gonna feel like it's his duty to come after me. And I'm not going back to prison. I spent eighteen months in that hell-hole and I'm not going back. Not

for you. Not for anybody. And if Clint Wesley tries to take me in, I'll kill him. You tell him that. As for Walsh, I called him out and I killed him. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Wordlessly, Rachel shook her head, thinking she had never seen such a hard cold expression in a man's eyes before.

Abruptly, the look on Tyree's face changed and Rachel knew he was going to reach for her. The memory of his last kiss made her knees tremble, and she turned on her heel and ran for the safety of the house, running as though all the hounds of hell were barking at her heels.

Tyree did not follow her.

## *Chapter 6*

The day of the box social bloomed bright and clear. Tyree was sitting on the front porch chewing on a cigar when Clint Wesley came to call for Rachel. The Marshal, damn his hide, looked handsome as hell in a blue plaid shirt, black denim pants, and a black leather vest. And Rachel, bless her, looked good enough to eat, all gussied up in a pink and white polka-dot dress. A large white sunbonnet trimmed with long pink and blue streamers was perched atop her honey-colored hair.

Tyree scowled as the young couple went off in a rented hack, laughing and smiling at each other like a couple of carefree school kids.

Tyree had scoffed at the idea of anything as



frivolous as a box social. No one else on the ranch seemed to share his opinion, however, and soon he was the only one left at the Lazy H. Even old man Halloran had ridden off to town earlier that morning.

Tyree sat on the porch for over an hour, enjoying the solitude, content to be alone with his thoughts.

It was nearing noon when hunger tugged at Tyree's belly. The idea of cooking left him cold and he decided to ride into town and grab a bite at the saloon. Ten minutes later, he was swinging into the saddle and riding toward Yellow Creek at a good fast trot.

He heard the noise of a fiddle and the shrieks of kids having a good time long before he rode into the town itself. Entering the town proper, he saw a dozen couples dancing on a clearing in front of the schoolhouse. Rachel and Wesley were among them, holding hands and laughing as they sashayed back and forth.

Farther down the road, several tables were set up. They were covered with gaily colored cloths and piled high with cakes and pies and cookies. Another table, covered with a white linen cloth, stood off by itself, loaded with box suppers all done up in ribbons and bows and fancy paper. The sale of those boxes would be the highlight of the day's festivities.

Leaving the gray stallion at the livery stable, Tyree sauntered down the main street, his left thumb hooked over his gunbelt, his right hand brushing the butt of the .44 strapped to his

right thigh. He could feel the curious stares and disapproving glances of the townspeople directed at his back as he moved toward the schoolhouse, his hunger forgotten.

Yellow Creek wasn't much of a town, compared to Dodge or Wichita or El Paso. There was a church to please the ladies, a school to educate the kids, a small hotel. Thorngood's General Store was sandwiched between Bowsher's Saloon and a Chinese laundry. The newspaper office stood next to the marshal's office. A half-dozen small stores catered to the needs of the local farmers and their families.

Tyree took a place against the schoolhouse wall, his hooded amber eyes watching Rachel's every move. She was by far the prettiest girl in town and though Tyree hated to admit it, she was the real reason for his presence at what he considered a foolish waste of time and energy. Men of all ages vied for Rachel's attention, willingly waiting in line just to dance with her, telling her jokes and clowning around like schoolboys in hopes of making her smile.

No one ventured near Tyree.

The dancing went on for another quarter of an hour, and then the fiddler put his fiddle away and the contests began. Clint Wesley entered the pie-eating contest and won first place. Overcome with the thrill of victory, Wesley grabbed Rachel and kissed her soundly on the mouth, smearing her face with cherry pie as several of the local gents

cheered him on. The blacksmith won the wrestling match, which came as no surprise to anyone. He had arms like oak trees and a chest like a beer keg. A young, freckle-faced boy of about fifteen won the foot race, while a fairly attractive young woman won the archery contest.

Tyree watched it all with a curious sense of scorn and envy. It was all such nonsense, stuffing pie down your throat, or chasing a greased pig, or engaging in a tug-of-war across a mud puddle. And yet, for all that, everyone appeared to be having a good time.

It was nearing two o'clock when the Mayor called for quiet. "Ladies," he began, bowing formally to the group of women clustered around the table bearing the box suppers. "Gentlemen. It's time for the bidding to start. As you know, any man who buys a basket will not only buy a delicious lunch, but will be entitled to share the meal with the charming young lady who prepared it. The proceeds will, of course, go toward building a new parsonage for the Reverend Jenkins and his lovely family."

The Mayor inclined his head toward the minister and his family as he picked up the first basket. "This one smells like fried chicken and apple pie," he said jovially. "What am I bid?"

Rachel's basket was the fifth one offered. Clint Wesley made the first bid, at a dollar, and



in a matter of minutes the bidding had gone up to ten dollars as every eligible young man in town bid on Rachel's lunch, and a chance to be alone with her.

"Ten dollars," the Mayor was saying. "Going once, going twice—"

"Fifteen dollars."

Heads turned. A few of the older women gasped out loud, a few of the younger ones stared enviously at Rachel. Fifteen dollars!

Clint Wesley threw a hard look at Tyree. Very quietly, the Marshal raised his bid to sixteen dollars.

"Twenty dollars," Tyree called.

"Twenty-one," Wesley said, answering the challenge.

Tyree glanced at Rachel, who stood blushing furiously beside the Mayor. Then, throwing Wesley a wry grin, Tyree bid fifty dollars, knowing the Marshal could not afford to match such an outrageous bid, not on a lawman's pay.

The Mayor looked at Wesley askance. Slowly, Clint shook his head.

"Sold to the stranger in black for fifty dollars!" the Mayor declared with a broad grin. "Hope you enjoy it."

With the basket paid for, Tyree followed Rachel to a shady spot near the schoolhouse, dropped down beside her on the blanket she spread on the ground.

"You must be awfully hungry," Rachel mut-

tered, "to spend fifty dollars on a lunch you could buy for fifty cents at the restaurant down the street."

"It's your company I'm buying," Tyree replied candidly. "And we both know it."

Rachel's cheeks flushed at that. Wordlessly, she opened the basket, filled a plate with baked ham, potato salad, a slice of fresh-baked bread, salad, and strawberries. She handed the plate to Tyree, poured him a glass of cold cider.

Rachel ate without tasting her food, conscious of Tyree's predatory gaze, and of Clint's presence only a few yards away. Millie Cloward sat beside Wesley, her basket between them. Millie was a plump young woman with mousy brown hair and placid brown eyes. She was not popular with the young men, and at the moment she looked mighty pleased to have a handsome young man like the Marshal all to herself. Clint Wesley responded to her ceaseless chatter automatically, more interested in keeping an eye on Tyree and Rachel than listening to Millie ramble on about her sister's wedding.

After a few moments, Rachel put her plate aside and regarded Tyree with frankly curious eyes. "Why did you come here today? I thought you said this kind of thing was silly, and no fit way for a grown man to spend his time."

Tyree shrugged. "So I changed my mind.

You gonna sit there and glare at me all afternoon just because I outbid Wesley for your lunch?"

"No. But you must have known Clint and I planned to eat together."

"Then he should have topped my offer."

"He can't afford to spend fifty dollars on a box lunch and you know it."

"Lucky for me, his being so poor," Tyree said, grinning at her. "Come on, cheer up. What's in that tent, yonder?"

"A fortune-teller. I hear she's quite remarkable."

"That right? What say we go take a look? I've never seen a gypsy before."

Rachel smiled at Tyree, suddenly pleased with the thought of spending some time with him. He had obviously bought her supper because he wanted to be with her, or maybe just to irritate Clint. Whatever the reason, she didn't care. She knew only that she was suddenly, unaccountably happy.

"I'm game if you are," she said agreeably. "But it's just a lot of hocus-pocus."

The interior of the tent was stark and dim, the only furnishings a small round table made of dark wood and a pair of straight-backed chairs that had seen better days. A fat white candle sputtered in the center of the table, casting eerie shadows on the canvas walls.

The fortune-teller was seated behind the table, facing the doorway. She was not a



gypsy, after all, but an old Apache squaw with iron-gray hair and sunken cheeks. A shapeless red dress hung loose on her frail frame.

A full minute went by before she acknowledged their presence with a faint nod. Then, staring at them through fathomless black eyes, she spoke in a raspy, faraway voice.

"Sit, my children. Give me your hand. Lady first."

Feeling suddenly apprehensive, Rachel took a seat and placed her right hand into the claw-like palm of the old woman.

A moment passed by, and the tent was silent save for the sputtering flame.

"There has been trouble in your life," the old woman said tonelessly. "You think it is over, but it will rise again when you least expect it."

Nodding to herself, the Apache woman turned Rachel's hand over and ran a gnarled, bony finger across Rachel's palm. "You are not married, though two men desire to have you. One loves you with his whole heart and will make a good husband and provider. There will be little excitement in your life if you marry this man, yet you will live in peace and want for nothing. The other man also loves you, though he does not yet know it. Life with this man will be turbulent at times, but if you marry him, you will never regret it."

Rachel leaned forward. Despite her earlier skepticism, she felt herself drawn into the hypnotic web of the old woman's eyes and

voice. "How shall I know which man to choose?"

The Indian woman cocked her head to one side, as though listening to a distant voice that only she could hear. "When the time comes, you will know which man is right."

Rachel gazed intently at the fortune-teller, believing the woman's words in spite of herself. She waited for the old woman to go on and was disappointed when the seer dropped her hand and turned to Tyree.

"You now."

For a moment, a strange stillness hung over the dingy little tent. The Apache woman's depthless black eyes looked hard at Tyree, as if seeking to penetrate his soul.

"You are of the blood," she murmured, taking Tyree's hand in hers. "It has brought sorrow into your life, but it has also made you strong. Perhaps too strong." There was a long silence as she stared past Tyree.

Was she gazing down the long corridor of Tyree's past, Rachel wondered, or peering into the murky darkness that was the future?

The candle sputtered, the soft hiss sounding overly loud in the taut stillness that shrouded the tent. Rachel glanced sideways at Tyree. His eyes were intent upon the face of the old woman, his expression almost frightening in its intensity. He believes her, Rachel mused incredulously. He believes every word.

The old woman took a deep breath, and her hand tightened around Tyree's. "I see great

turmoil in your future," she predicted in a voice heavy with sadness. "And great pain. But you will triumph, and in the end you will find that which you thought forever gone out of your life."

The gray head drooped. The withered hands withdrew. The ancient eyes closed. The reading was over.

Tyree pressed a twenty dollar gold piece into the Apache woman's hand before following Rachel outside. The sun seemed extraordinarily bright after the tent's gloomy darkness, and Rachel took a deep breath, feeling as if she had just escaped from some sorcerer's dungeon. Here, in the sunlight, it was hard to remember how convincing the old woman had been.

"Well, that was certainly interesting," Rachel said, laughing.

"Yes," Tyree agreed.

"Her predictions for you were a little gloomy, don't you think? I thought fortune-tellers were supposed to foretell happy things."

"I thought she was very perceptive," Tyree remarked.

"Perceptive, indeed," Rachel said disdainfully. Now that they were away from the old woman, the whole incident seemed ridiculous. "She said there had been trouble in my life, and that two men desire me." Rachel laughed again. "Everyone has trouble in their life, and most girls have more than one beau."



"She knew I was part Indian," Tyree pointed out. "She wasn't guessing about that."

"Be serious, Tyree! Anyone can tell that just by looking at you."

"Yeah," Tyree agreed softly. "But she was blind."

Rachel digested that bit of information for a moment. Was it possible the old woman was really gifted, and not just some charlatan? Rachel glanced at Tyree. It was easy to see from his expression that he had been deeply impressed with the old Indian woman's predictions.

"You don't believe all that stuff, do you?" Rachel asked, hoping he would say no and dispel the uneasiness that was settling over her. "Not really?"

"I don't know," Tyree answered slowly. "When I lived with the Mescalero, there was an old medicine man who could foretell the future with uncanny accuracy."

"Coincidence, perhaps?"

"Perhaps, but—"

A sudden burst of gunfire near the Blackjack Saloon stifled Tyree's reply and he immediately turned in that direction, his hand poised over the butt of his .44, his eyes narrowed against the sun.

But there was no danger, and he relaxed when he saw that the commotion was being caused by a half-dozen men shooting at empty whiskey and beer bottles. In minutes, a crowd

had gathered around the sharpshooters and money began to change hands as bets were made and paid off.

Tyree watched with interest as a gangly young man with limp brown hair and washed-out green eyes calmly proceeded to outshoot five competitors.

The boy was good, Tyree allowed. Damn good. Fast as lightning. But, even more important, he had a sharp eye and the kind of eye-and-hand coordination that could not be taught. It was a gift, an innate quality few men possessed, one that allowed a man to place his shots exactly where he wanted them.

"That's Pauley Norquist," Rachel remarked. "He's the best shot in town. He's won the Thanksgiving turkey shoot every year for the last five years."

Tyree grunted as Norquist shattered another bottle.

"He is good, isn't he?" Rachel mused as Pauley drew his gun and fired at three bottles thrown into the air in rapid succession.

"How many men has he killed?" Tyree asked flatly. "Anybody can shoot bottles out of the air."

"Is that all you ever think about?" Rachel exclaimed, exasperated. "Killing?"

"I think about other things occasionally," Tyree drawled, and his amber eyes moved over her in a long lustful glance that brought a shiver to Rachel's spine and made her heart flutter in a most peculiar fashion.

"He hasn't killed anybody," Rachel answered, wishing Tyree would stop looking at her as if he could see through her clothing. "He's a shopkeeper, not a hired gun."

There was a sudden cessation in the contests as a swarthy-faced man in a flowered brocade vest and striped pants stepped out of the crowd and put his arm around Pauley's shoulders.

"Gents," he said in a loud voice. "I'm prepared to back Norquist, here, against all comers. Anybody got the guts to shoot against my boy for twenty dollars?"

Several men stepped forward, and Tyree watched with real admiration as Norquist beat them one by one.

When the last man walked away in defeat, Norquist's backer raised up a chubby hand stuffed with greenbacks. "I've got two hundred dollars here," he called out jovially. "And Pauley's still rarin' to go!"

"I'll take that bet," Tyree said, walking to where Norquist and the gambler stood. "Pick a target."

"How much of this do you want?" the gambler asked, rifling the bills in his hand.

"All of it," Tyree said, pulling a wad of greenbacks out of his hip pocket.

There followed an extraordinary contest as Pauley Norquist and Logan Tyree matched each other shot for shot, until there were no more empty bottles left. It was a contest the likes of which Rachel had never seen and she



looked at the two men with awe. Truly, they were amazing.

"Looks like we'll have to call it a draw," Norquist said good-naturedly. He holstered his gun, ready to call it quits.

"Or try a different kind of target," the gambler suggested.

"We're just wasting ammunition," Tyree said, reloading his Colt. "The kid, here, is a fine shot. I'm satisfied with a draw."

"Well, I'm not," the gambler said curtly. "We made a bet, and it has to be decided, one way or the other."

"Mr. Brockton, let him have the money," Pauley Norquist said. "It isn't important."

"Brockton!" Tyree whistled under his breath. "I thought you cashed in down on the Panhandle."

"Not hardly," Brockton said impudently.

"You killed a friend of mine down there, Newt Ralston."

"Ralston! I didn't know that squaw lover *had* any friends."

"He had one. You as fast with that iron as they say?"

"Only one way to find out," Brockton said. Very slowly, his hand lifted to hover over his gun butt.

Tyree swore under his breath. He had not meant to goad the man into a fight, not with Rachel standing behind him, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Make your move," Brockton challenged.

“Forget it.”

Brockton laughed. “I might have known any friend of Ralston’s would be a coward. Go for your gun, squawman, or I’ll shoot you down where you stand.”

“If you think you can do it, go ahead.”

Rachel’s gasp sounded like thunder in the sudden silence that surrounded the two men. Brockton reached for his gun, his eyes shining with confidence. But Tyree’s draw was quicker, smoother. The bullet slammed into Brockton’s right shoulder, numbing his arm so that he dropped his gun into the dirt.

“Get out of here,” Tyree said in a hard voice.

Brockton nodded, his face white as he turned away from the crowd and made his way down the street.

Tyree stared after him. Once he would have killed the man without a qualm, but not now. Not with Rachel watching his every move.

The crowd parted like soft butter as Tyree took Rachel’s arm and headed for the schoolyard.

“Damn!” murmured Wesley, who had watched the whole thing from the sidelines. “One of these days he’s gonna kill someone, and I’m gonna have to take him in.”





## *Chapter 7*

*I*t was John Halloran's sixtieth birthday and Rachel was planning a party. She spent several days organizing the menu, and then spent another full day trying to decide how to get rid of Tyree on the night of the party.

As it turned out, Tyree solved the problem for her. One look at the guest list was all it took. Rachel had invited Essie O'Shay, who was the Yellow Creek schoolmarm; Olaf Johnson, the blacksmith; Mr. and Mrs. Thorngood, who owned the General Store; Gus Kibbee, who doubled as barber and dentist; Vincent Myers, editor of the local newspaper; and her best friend, Carol Ann McKee. The Reverend and Mrs. Jenkins were also on the list, as well

as Clint Wesley, and several other, equally dreary people.

It was the thought of making polite conversation with the likes of the minister and the marshal that persuaded Tyree to spend the evening in town.

He left the Lazy H just before dark.

Rachel's party was a big success. The food was excellent, the guests congenial, the conversation intelligent, interspersed with witticisms and laughter. They ate and danced and played a few parlor games before Rachel served the cake.

By midnight, everyone had gone home except for Clint Wesley, who lingered on the front porch with Rachel, reluctant to bid her goodnight.

"It's pretty out," Rachel commented. "The stars are beautiful."

"You're prettier than any star," Clint murmured, taking her in his arms. "You're the prettiest, sweetest, most wonderful girl I've ever known."

"You probably say that to all the girls," Rachel teased, though she was flattered by his kind words.

"You know you're the only girl for me," Clint said earnestly.

"Am I?" Rachel was boldly flirting now. "Millie Cloward couldn't keep her eyes off you in church last Sunday."

"Millie Cloward!" Clint exclaimed in a

pained tone. "She looks like a pregnant heifer."

"She does not. She has a lovely figure. And I overheard Mrs. Cloward say she'd be happy as a clam to have a lawman in the family."

Clint looked genuinely shocked. "You're not serious?"

"Yes, indeed," Rachel assured him with mock gravity. "Mrs. Cloward is going to invite you to Sunday dinner next week. And Millie is making a new dress for the occasion. I saw her in Thorngood's picking out material and she was all aflutter."

Wesley groaned. "Whatever made her think that I . . . I never did anything to . . . Why, I've hardly spoken ten words to the girl."

"Well, you did buy her lunch at the box social," Rachel pointed out, laughing impishly. "And you did look like you were enjoying yourself."

"Don't be silly. I only bought that awful box because I felt sorry for her. And so I could keep an eye on you and that gunslinger."

"Well, Millie seems to think there was much more to it than that. And I'm sure she would make you a truly fine wife."

"Wife!" Clint choked on the word. "Rachel, you've got to get me out of this. Invite me to dinner next Sunday."

"Coward."

"Guilty as charged," Wesley allowed. "Can I come for dinner?"

"Of course." Rachel's laughter was as light



and musical as the tinkling of Christmas bells. "You know you're always welcome here. Listen! Candido is playing his guitar."

Wesley nodded as the faint strains of a Spanish love song drifted up from the bunk-house. Wordlessly, he held out his arms and Rachel moved into his embrace, their feet moving to the melody as they danced across the porch.

Tyree watched them from the shadows beside the house, feeling a sharp twinge of jealousy as Clint Wesley kissed Rachel. They stayed in each other's arms a long time, now dancing, now kissing, now just standing quietly close. The moonlight touched Rachel's hair, turning the gold to silver. Her expression was soft, warm, beautiful.

Rachel sighed as she laid her head on Clint's shoulder. They had been courting for over a year now, and still Clint had not asked her to marry him. But he would. And she was content to wait. She felt safe with Clint, secure. He would always be there, dependable as the sun. There were no high mountains in their relationship, but there were no dark valleys, either.

"I guess I'd better be going," Clint said with regret. "I've got a meeting with Judge Thackery in the morning. Eight o'clock sharp."

"Will I see you Saturday?"

"You bet. And Sunday, too," Clint reminded

her. "And every Sunday until old lady Cloward gets the message."

Rachel laughed softly as she took Clint's arm and walked with him down the stairs to where his horse was tethered. Still smiling, she lifted her face for one last kiss.

Dreamy-eyed, she stared after Clint as he rode out of the yard. She was picturing herself as Clint's wife when she became aware of someone standing behind her. Startled, she whirled around to find Tyree at her shoulder. With a curt nod of her head, Rachel acknowledged his presence, then started toward the front steps.

"Seems a shame to let that music go to waste," Tyree drawled, pulling her into his arms, and before Rachel could protest, he was waltzing her around the moon-dappled yard.

"I never thought of you as a dancing man," Rachel remarked, hoping a little lighthearted conversation would cover the nervousness she felt at his nearness.

"Oh, I've got a lot of talents you've never dreamed of," Tyree assured her. "Shall I whisper sweet nothings in your ear, and tell you you're prettier than all the stars in the sky?"

Anger flared deep in Rachel's eyes as she twisted out of Tyree's arms. "How dare you spy on us!"

"I wasn't spying. I just happened to get back while the two of you were on the front porch."

"You should have made your presence known," Rachel accused.

"Maybe," Tyree allowed with a shrug. "But it seemed a shame to intrude on such a romantic moment."

Rachel glared at him, irritated by the sardonic laughter dancing in the depths of his amber eyes. Oh, but he was incorrigible!

"Come here," Tyree whispered.

Rachel shook her head, confused by the conflicting emotions that warred within her breast. She knew she should go inside the house, knew that it was wrong to be alone in the moonlight with a man like Tyree. He wanted only one thing from her, and she had vowed it would never happen again. And yet, knowing all those things, she did not resist when he drew her into his arms a second time.

The music from Candido's guitar filled the air with a haunting melody that spoke of lost love and bitter tears shed in the darkness of a long and lonely night. Tyree's arms were strong around her as they danced under the stars, and Rachel's body molded to his as if they had danced together for years. He was incredibly light on his feet, and she thought again how catlike Tyree was, his movements always quick and sure with a smooth masculine grace, his eyes yellow-gold, like a tiger's.

Tyree was intensely aware of the woman in his arms. The scent of her perfume filled his



nostrils, her nearness filled his senses and his arms tightened around her waist, drawing her closer, closer.

His eyes met hers, then dropped downward to linger on her mouth. He felt the sudden intake of her breath and he knew she was remembering Sunset Canyon, just as he was.

Rachel flushed under his probing gaze, but could not draw her eyes from his. Tyree's kiss came unexpectedly, catching her off-guard. One moment he was gazing into her face, and the next his mouth was slanting over hers, sending sparks to every part of her body. For a time, she remained placid in his embrace, caught up in the magic of the music and the moonlight and the waves of pleasure his merest touch sent spiraling through her.

"You really are lovely," Tyree murmured in her ear. "Your eyes are as blue as cornflowers, and your hair is as soft as new grass." His lips moved to her neck, nibbling softly. "Sweet," he whispered huskily. "So sweet."

"Tyree, you mustn't—" Rachel protested weakly.

"Mustn't what?"

Confused, Rachel shook her head. "I don't know. You make me feel so strange."

"There's nothing strange about this," Tyree said. His hands caressed her back while his mouth traveled up her neck toward her left earlobe. "It's all perfectly natural. Kiss me, Rachel."

"No. Go away and leave me alone."

"You don't like me very much, do you?" he asked, but there was no anger in his voice, no reproach, only a husky yearning.

"No," Rachel replied quickly. "I like men who are gentlemen."

"I can be a gentle man," Tyree purred in a low tone. "Kiss me and see."

Feeling as though she were in a trance, Rachel stood on tiptoe and pressed her mouth to Tyree's, bewildered by the tremors that shook her from head to foot as his mouth met hers. She did not even like Logan Tyree, she thought absently, and yet his kisses left her weak and wanting, sparking a hunger deep in her insides the likes of which she had never known. Clint's kisses never aroused her in such a way, never left her longing for more than just kisses. But Tyree had only to touch her and every nerve ending in her body sprang to life, straining toward him, eager to be touched and caressed. It was most peculiar.

"You're beautiful," Tyree said, his voice low and husky, mesmerizing. He stroked her hair, bent to breathe in the scent of it. "So damn beautiful."

"Tyree, don't—"

"I want to make love to you. Now. Tonight."

Rachel shook her head. She had vowed never to surrender to Logan Tyree again. One mistake was enough.

"Rachel." His voice was warm and coaxing, sweeter than honey.

He kissed her again. Unbidden, unwanted, came the memory of his body pressing against hers, possessing her. As though reading her thoughts, he pulled her close. His tongue slid over her lips, teasing the soft inner flesh of her lower lip like a darting finger of flame, spreading a delicious warmth to every fiber of her being. His hands moved lazily over her shoulders and back and hips, gentling her to his touch, arousing her to fever pitch, letting her feel his rising desire, until she stood trembling in his arms, her eyes half-closed, her heart fluttering wildly, her face lifted for his kisses.

Mesmerized by his touch, she sagged against him while he continued to murmur soft words in her ear. It felt so good to be in his arms, to feel his hard length pressed against her. His voice was soft, husky, entreating.

It was only when she found herself being carried swiftly toward the barn that sanity returned. Alarmed, she slapped Tyree's face with all the force at her command. Who did he think he was, that he could woo her so easily! Did he think a few sweet words would render her completely senseless, so that he could have his way with her?

Tyree stared down at Rachel, anger and surprise reflected in his hot yellow eyes.

"Logan Tyree, you put me down this instant," Rachel demanded indignantly.

"Change your mind?" Tyree asked dryly. But he did not put her down.



"No! Yes! Oh, I never intended for you to . . . to . . . and you know it!"

"You seemed pretty willing a minute ago."

"I was not. I . . . you tricked me."

One black eyebrow arched upward like a question mark. "Tricked you?" Tyree mused. "Don't be silly. Why don't you just admit you're as eager for it as I am?"

Rachel's cheeks flushed crimson as words failed her completely. A sudden guilt brought tears to her eyes and she lowered her head, refusing to look at Tyree because what he said was true. All too true. She did want him. Desperately. No matter that she constantly professed to hate him. No matter that she continually professed to despise his touch and all he stood for. The truth was that she *liked* Logan Tyree and that thought frightened her almost as much as the way her body responded to the desire in his eyes and the slightest touch of his hands. Even now, she longed to let him carry her to the barn and satisfy the need he had aroused in her. But it was wrong, so very wrong.

Tyree held her in his arms for what seemed like forever and then, gently, he set her on her feet and walked away, leaving Rachel standing alone in the moonlight, feeling suddenly empty and very alone.

Rachel was trying to understand her feelings for Tyree the next morning when she slipped on the back stairs and sprained her ankle. It was Tyree who found her lying in a

heap at the bottom of the steps, her face white with pain.

Wordlessly, he carried her into the house and up the stairs to her bedroom, where he deposited her gently on the bed. Panic took hold of Rachel as Tyree stood looking down at her. Only the night before he had tried to seduce her, and now she was helpless, and quite alone in the house.

"Tyree—"

"Just sit tight," he said, ignoring the anxiety that was evident in her voice and eyes. "I don't think anything's broken."

"It hurts like blazes."

"You want me to send for your old man?"

Rachel considered that for a moment, then shook her head. Her father had left before dawn to visit an old friend who had been in a bad accident, and now that her initial panic had subsided, she saw no reason to summon him home. There was nothing he could do. And surely even a man as callous as Tyree wouldn't try to take advantage of her now.

Tyree's hands were surprisingly gentle as he wrapped her ankle in a towel he had soaked in cold water.

"You'll be all right," he assured her. "Lie back and take it easy. I'll send for the saw-bones."

To Rachel's distress, the doctor prescribed two weeks in bed.

"Two weeks!" Rachel complained to Tyree later. "Who'll look after the house while I'm stuck in bed?"

"I think I can handle things around here until you're back on your feet," Tyree said with a shrug.

"You?" Rachel laughed out loud. "Who's going to do the washing and ironing and the cooking and—"

Tyree dropped a hand over Rachel's mouth, effectively stifling her tirade. "Nothing to it," he drawled, and proved it later that night by serving Rachel a dinner of roast beef, potatoes with brown gravy, peas, and hot biscuits only a little less light and fluffy than her own.

Tyree grinned at her as she ate with obvious enjoyment. "Well?"

"It's delicious," Rachel admitted.

"But?"

"But I just can't believe you made all this yourself."

"Why not? Who do you think cooks for me when I'm drifting?"

"I don't know," Rachel said with a shrug. "I guess I never gave it any thought."

"Yeah. Well, you be a good girl and tomorrow I'll fix you some fried chicken and dumplings that will melt in your mouth. And if you're real good, I might bake you a chocolate cake."

"I had no idea you were so domestic," Rachel muttered dryly.

"Just another of my hidden talents," Tyree retorted.

"Yes. Well, I'm sure you'll make some lucky girl a wonderful wife."



Tyree looked momentarily taken aback, then he quirked one black eyebrow at her. "That a proposal?"

"Of course not," Rachel answered quickly.

"Another hope crushed," Tyree lamented with mock sorrow. "Get some rest now."

Rachel's convalescence proved to be one surprise after another as Tyree took over the running of the house. Rachel had been born and raised on the ranch and she was used to the never-ending hard work that was a part of every ranch woman's life. To stay in bed and be waited on was a rare treat. For once, she had time to linger over a romantic novel, or browse through her father's mail order catalogs. She could even sit back and enjoy being idle without feeling guilty. She had time to think and dream and ponder, and most of her thoughts were of Tyree. When had she stopped hating him? When had she stopped thinking of him as a heartless murderer and begun to see him as a strong, virile, desirable man?

As promised, he took over the domestic chores and Rachel saw a side of him she had never dreamed existed. He waited on her as if she were a princess. He cooked her meals, changed the linen on her bed, laundered her clothing, including her underwear and stockings, changed the bandage on her ankle, swept the floors, and washed the dishes.

Some nights he rubbed her back, his hands

gently kneading her shoulders and back and neck. She reveled in the touch of his hands, warm and soothing through the material of her nightgown. Other nights he brushed her hair until it glistened like spun gold. His nearness thrilled her, filling her with excited tremors as he drew the brush through her hair, his breath warm upon her neck. Sometimes she wished he would take her in his arms and kiss her, but he never did.

Each morning there was a gift on her bedside table when she woke up: a bouquet of brightly colored flowers, a book of poetry, a box of candy, a bottle of fragrant perfume. When she tried to thank Tyree for his thoughtful gestures, he denied having anything to do with the gifts.

"Where did all these things come from then?" Rachel asked. "There's no one in the house except you and me."

But Tyree just shrugged. "Maybe you've got a secret admirer," he suggested, and refused to discuss the matter further.

One afternoon, he surprised her by carrying her outside and serving her an elaborate lunch under the shade of the old oak tree that grew alongside the house. Another time he served dinner on a blanket spread in front of the fireplace.

Rachel looked at Tyree through eyes filled with wonder, unable to believe that this was the same man who had cold-bloodedly gunned down Job Walsh, the same man who

had been willing to steal her virginity to humor six Apache warriors. She remembered how, when he had first arrived at the Lazy H, he had refused to do any work at all. He wouldn't mend a fence or help with the cattle. Still wouldn't, Rachel thought, confused. And yet he didn't seem to mind playing nursemaid for her and that was really odd, because most men, especially a man as virile and untamed as Tyree, would have handled housework awkwardly at best. Even Clint, who was a gentleman through and through, was self-conscious around ailing women, and totally out of his element where even the simplest domestic chores were concerned.

But what surprised Rachel the most about Tyree was the fact that he made no advances toward her and she could not help wondering if, deep down, some latent sense of chivalry prevented him from taking advantage of her while she was unable to defend herself.

She recalled how, late one night, they had talked to each other, really talked to each other, without malice or sarcasm. She had hoped to learn something about Tyree that would unlock the mystery of his past, but he had adroitly sidestepped all her questions. Looking back, Rachel could not remember how they got on the subject, but before she quite knew what was happening, she was telling Tyree of her hopes and dreams, how she longed to marry and raise a big family. Strong boys and beautiful accomplished girls who



would marry and raise families of their own, children who would subdue the land and bring civilization to the wilderness.

"It's all I've ever really wanted," Rachel had admitted shyly. "To be a wife and a mother, to have what my parents had before my mother died. But what about you, Tyree? What do you want out of life?"

Tyree had stared into the fireplace, his eyes intent on the dancing flames, his brow furrowed and thoughtful. Slowly, he shook his head. "I don't have any dreams," he had said quietly. "Not anymore."

Rachel had stared at him, bemused. No dreams? How could anyone, man or woman, live without dreams or hopes for the future? She thought about the Lazy H. If not for the hopes and dreams of her father and mother, the ranch would still be an empty stretch of uncultivated ground, untouched and unloved.

"Surely there must be something you want out of life?" Rachel had insisted. "Some goal that sustains you, some vision of the future that gives you hope and a reason for living?" She shook her head, not understanding. "Some dream to strive for?"

"Dreams are for fools," Tyree had retorted bitterly. "Or for the very young." He had been that young once, he thought, not wanting to remember. Red Leaf had been his dream, his hope for the future.

"Dreams are not for fools!" Rachel had

exclaimed. "My father is neither a fool nor a child, but he still dreams of the day when the Halloran name will stand for something in this part of the country."

Tyree's grin was melancholy as he muttered, "Sometimes I think I'm older than you and your old man put together. Hell, the best thing a man in my line of work can hope for is to grow a little older every day."

Rachel had wanted to argue with him further. Somehow, it had seemed important to make Tyree fight back, to make him admit that somewhere under that practical, hard-headed exterior there lurked a vision for the future.

But she never got the chance to probe further, for Tyree suddenly picked her up and carried her, protesting, to her room, putting an abrupt end to their conversation.

Rachel had stayed awake a long time that night, thoughts of Tyree crowding her mind. He was such a strange man. Not that she was an expert on men by any means. Far from that. But even in her limited experience with the opposite sex, she had learned that most men retained a boyish quality deep down inside. Her best friend's father loved practical jokes. Candido loved to wrestle or play tug-of-war. Even her own father was still a boy at heart. But there were no boyish qualities in the man known as Logan Tyree and she wondered if he had ever played or danced or

sung, or laughed out loud just because he was glad to be alive.

Carefully, she slid out of bed and hobbled to the window overlooking the front yard. As she had suspected, Tyree was there, pacing up and down, a cigar clamped between his teeth. What did he think about as he walked restlessly back and forth? What was there in his past that weighed him down so heavily?

She watched Tyree until her eyelids grew heavy and she went back to bed to sleep, and dream of a tall dark man with brooding amber eyes and a cynical grin.

Rachel had been in bed a little over a week when her best friend, Carol Ann McKee, came to call. Carol Ann was a pretty girl with curly auburn hair, mild brown eyes, a quick smile, and a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her turned-up nose. They had been close friends ever since Carol Ann's family moved to Yellow Creek eleven years ago.

The minute their hellos were over, Carol Ann dragged a chair close to the bed and blurted, with very real concern, "Rachel, my dear girl, how can you stay in this house alone with that dreadful man?"

"What dreadful man?" Rachel asked, forgetting that she, too, had once thought of Tyree as some kind of ogre.

"Why, Logan Tyree, of course. I insist you come and stay with me until your ankle is better."

"Carol Ann, I'm fine."



"Don't you know who he is?" Carol Ann asked in a hushed voice. "What he is?"

"Of course I know. But he's all right. Really. He's taking very good care of me."

Carol Ann looked doubtful. She had heard stories about Logan Tyree, about the men he had killed, the women he had abused. She had been in the crowd the day he had winged Brockton. People were still talking about that. Brockton hadn't been very well liked, but he had been a resident of Yellow Creek, and the townspeople didn't take kindly to strangers riding in and taking shots at the local citizens. For all that, no one had been sorry when Brockton left town.

"Carol Ann, I'm fine. Really," Rachel insisted. "He cooks for me and everything. Even cleans the house."

"He cooks!" Carol Ann exclaimed, practically choking on the words. "And cleans house? Mercy," she laughed. "Who would believe it?"

"Well, it's true, though I wouldn't spread it around town if I were you. But he can be very nice when it suits him."

"He doesn't look nice to me. In fact, he scares me to death. He hasn't tried to . . . you know?"

"No," Rachel answered firmly. "He hasn't."

"Well, personally, I'd be afraid to be in the same room with him," Carol Ann said, shivering at the mere thought. "He has the coldest eyes I've ever seen."

Everything Carol Ann had said about Tyree was true, Rachel mused when she was alone again. Tyree didn't look very nice. And he did have cold eyes. But he continued to treat her as if she were made of glass.

She was almost sorry when the doctor pronounced her well enough to get out of bed.

## *Chapter 8*

*The* list in Rachel's hand grew longer and longer as she went from cupboard to cupboard, absently jotting down the things she needed from the store in town: sugar, salt, flour, pepper, a case of peaches, some hard candy for her father, a horn of cheese, a bolt of cotton cloth, thread, dried apples, coffee. She added other items as they occurred to her, yet all the while it was Logan Tyree who filled her thoughts.

More and more he was on her mind. Why was he a gunfighter? What events in his past had shaped him into the kind of man he was now? What an enigma he was, changeable as the wind. Now cold as ice, now considerate and kind. She wondered if he had ever been



head-over-heels in love with a woman, or tasted the bitter tears of sorrow.

Nights, while she waited for sleep to come, his swarthy face danced before her eyes: the mouth cynical, the eyes cold, almost cruel. It was a strong face, one that revealed little warmth, little emotion. There seemed to be no softness in him, no place for tenderness or compassion. And yet she knew that to be untrue, for he displayed infinite patience with the gray mustang, and he had certainly been considerate of her own wants and needs during her recent convalescence.

Rachel grinned as she thought of the gray stud. Her father had ordered the horse put down as soon as he learned about Candido's broken leg, declaring he would not have a rank stallion on the place, but Tyree had asked if he could work with the bronc for a few days, and her father had reluctantly agreed.

Rachel had spent several hours watching Tyree work with the wild stallion. He was a beautiful horse. Predominantly gray in color, with three black stockings, a black mane and tail, and the spotted hindquarters that denoted Appaloosa blood.

While admiring the stud, Rachel could not help but notice that, in his own way, Logan Tyree was also a beautiful animal. He often worked without a shirt, exposing skin as brown as an Apache's, and powerful muscles that rippled in the sunlight. The sight of his

naked torso did peculiar things to the pit of her stomach. Sometimes, watching Tyree, she suddenly felt warm all over. So many muscles, she mused and could not help remembering the unyielding strength of his arms around her the night of her father's birthday party. Occasionally, as now, she thought how nice it would be to feel those arms around her again. Sometimes she could not help wondering what it would have been like if she had surrendered to the longing in his eyes.

Tyree and the stud—they drew her eyes like a magnet, making her heart pound and her blood race. They were a perfect match, both headstrong and wild, both wary and distrustful of people. But, little by little, the man was winning the mustang's trust and affection.

In the days that followed, Tyree discarded the harsh curb bit in favor of a light hackamore, and Rachel noticed that he never wore spurs when working the stallion. Tyree seemed blessed with endless patience, never raising his voice, never striking out at the horse when it failed to respond, never resorting to force or fear.

Rachel watched, fascinated, as Tyree taught the gray to rein right and left, to slide stop, to back on cue, to break into a full gallop from a standing start, patiently coaxing the skittish stallion to respond to hand and heel and voice. And always he spoke to the horse in that strange, soft tongue.

Once the gray had learned the basics, Tyree

taught the horse to go to its knees on command, to come at his call, to cut a cow from a herd, to stand ground-tied for as long as necessary.

It was hard to believe that a drifting gunslinger could succeed with the horse where a top hand like Candido had failed, but it was true, nonetheless. Within a matter of weeks, Tyree had turned a rank bronc into a well-mannered saddle horse that anyone on the ranch could ride, though Rachel thought the gray worked a little better and stepped a little higher when Tyree was in the saddle.

Scowling, Rachel pushed Tyree from her mind and settled her thoughts on Clint Wesley. Almost as tall and broad as Tyree, Clint reminded Rachel of the prince in a fairy tale, with his sunbleached blond hair and mild blue eyes. Clint's mouth was wide and honest and never curled down in that mocking way that Tyree's did. His face was open and honest, hiding nothing, not an impassive facade that shut out his thoughts and kept the world at bay.

Going to her room, Rachel stood before the mirror, brushing her hair until it was soft and shimmering. Tying the heavy golden mass away from her face with a crisp white linen ribbon, she slipped out of her work garb and donned a light blue cotton dress that had a scoop neck and short sleeves. It was Clint's favorite, and if luck was with her, she just might run into him while shopping in town.



She was humming softly as she skipped down to the barn. Her father was waiting for her there.

"Mornin', Pa," Rachel said cheerfully.

"Mornin', daughter."

"Isn't it a lovely day?"

"Yeah, lovely," Halloran replied absently.

"Listen, Rachel, I don't want you driving into town alone this morning."

"Why not?"

"I saw smoke in the hills awhile ago. Could be nothing. Could be the 'Paches are on the prod again."

Apaches! Rachel's face paled a trifle as she recalled her last encounter with Indians. Perhaps she shouldn't go into town after all.

"You can take Tyree with you," Halloran decided. "You'll be safe with him."

"Tyree!" Rachel wailed in dismay. "Can't I take Candido? Or Cahill?"

"No. Tyree's the only man on the place who isn't doing anything just now."

"He hasn't done anything in weeks," Rachel pointed out sourly. "Why is he still hanging around here anyway? We could hire two wranglers for what it's costing us to keep him here."

"Rachel—"

"All right, Pa, I'm sorry. Where is he? I'm ready to go."

"Right here," Tyree said, materializing out of the barn's shadowy interior. "Nice to know you're so happy to have me along."

"Oh, shut up."

"Want me to drive?"

"I can do it," Rachel said curtly, and scrambled into the buggy.

"Suit yourself," Tyree drawled, unperturbed by her obvious annoyance. Climbing into the buggy, he stretched his long legs out in front of him and hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt.

They drove in silence for several miles. Tyree seemed totally relaxed and at ease, and yet Rachel could not help feeling that he was aware of every rock and tree and rabbit they passed. Glancing his way, she noticed his eyes were continually moving over the countryside and she supposed, correctly, that it was his constant awareness of everything around him that had kept him alive so long.

"You gonna marry that badge-toter?" Tyree asked after awhile.

"Maybe."

"Has he asked you yet?"

"No."

"He will. He looks at you like a love-sick bull calf."

"He's a fine man!" Rachel cried defensively. "And I'd be proud to be his wife. He's kind and honest and loyal, and not just a . . . a—"

"No good saddle tramp like me?"

"That's not what I was going to say," Rachel replied sullenly.

"It's exactly what you wanted to say," Tyree

said with a grin. "Wesley's the knight in shining armor and I'm the dragon."

"Oh? And what does that make me? The wicked witch?"

"Of course not," Tyree said smoothly. "You're the beautiful princess."

"Oh, good!" Rachel exclaimed enthusiastically. "That means I get to marry the handsome knight."

"Not in my fairy tale," Tyree objected gruffly.

"How does your story end?" Rachel asked, wondering why it was suddenly so hard to speak.

"The dragon slays the handsome knight and carries the princess off to his lair in the mountains."

Grimacing, Rachel said, "I think I like happy endings better."

"My ending is happy."

"Yes, but only for the dragon."

Tyree's hard amber eyes pierced Rachel's like twin daggers. "Maybe for the princess, too."

"I doubt it. There can be happiness only when like marries like."

"How do you know we're not alike?"

Tyree's soft reply sent shivers down Rachel's spine. Flustered, she stammered, "Because . . . because I . . . we could never—" Unable to think of a suitable answer, she stared ahead at the road. Her stomach was



doing crazy flip-flops, and her mouth was dry as dust. Imagine, being married to Tyree . . .

She sighed with relief as the town came into view, but her hands were still shaking minutes later when she drew the team to a halt at the General Store. She hopped out of the buggy before Tyree could assist her.

Tyree followed Rachel into Thorngood's where he stood against one wall, arms folded across his chest like a cigar store Indian while Rachel made her purchases. Rachel willed him to go away and let her shop in peace, but he seemed quite content just to stand there, watching her, like a cat at a mousehole.

The other customers in the store made a wide berth around Tyree. His reputation was well-known, and his shoot-out with Brockton was still being talked about from one end of town to the other. Rufus Thorngood kept a wary eye on Tyree, as if he feared the gunman might draw his weapon and rob the cashbox.

Rachel's smile was weak as she thanked the Thorngoods and stepped outside, Tyree close on her heels. They were standing at the buggy, waiting for their supplies to be loaded, when Clint Wesley joined them. Tyree frowned. The Marshal looked properly official in black Levi's, crisp white shirt, and shiny tin star.

While Rachel and the Marshal exchanged pleasantries, Tyree's eyes swept the main street. Satisfied there was no posse tagging along in the badge-toter's footsteps, he shifted his position so that his back was toward the

sun. It was a move that did not go unnoticed by Wesley, and Clint stepped away from Rachel, not wanting her to be caught in the line of fire if Tyree decided to take a shot at him.

"Afternoon, Tyree," Clint said quietly.

"Marshal."

"I was looking through some old flyers last night."

"Good for you."

"I found a couple that might interest you," Wesley remarked, reaching inside his vest.

"I wouldn't do that," Tyree warned, and though his words were softly spoken and without menace, Clint quickly dropped his hand to his side, away from his gun.

"I guess you've seen those flyers before," Wesley said. "There's one from the Dakotas, and another from El Paso."

"Keep looking. You'll find one from Ellsworth, too. So what?"

Wesley took a deep breath. "So I'm gonna have to take you in."

"That right?" Tyree drawled, looking amused.

"Dammit, Tyree, it's my job."

"You do what you have to do, Marshal, but I'm not going back to Yuma."

"But it's my job," Wesley sputtered.

"So you said. Rachel, get in the buggy."

She quickly did as bidden, afraid that Clint would actually try to arrest Tyree, and that Tyree would kill him without a qualm.

The two men stared at each other for a full

minute; Tyree, cool and aloof, Clint nervous and showing it, eager to do his job, yet intimidated by Tyree's reputation and by his own lack of experience.

For a moment, it looked like there would be gunplay, but then Tyree swung up on the seat beside Rachel, and Clint stomped off toward the jailhouse, his face flushed with anger.

Rachel stared after Clint, confused by the chaotic thoughts tumbling through her mind. On the one hand, she was glad Clint had sense enough not to tangle with a scoundrel like Logan Tyree. Clint was a fine man, a good town marshal, but he was no match for a professional gunman. And yet, perversely, she could not help being ashamed of Clint for not standing up to Tyree.

"The Marshal's got more sense than I gave him credit for," Tyree drawled, slapping the reins across the lead horse's rump. "Most law dogs would have felt duty-bound to try and take me in."

"I guess you think he's a coward!" Rachel snapped, hating herself for thinking the same thing.

Tyree stared at her, one dark eyebrow raised quizzically. "Did I say he was a coward?"

"No," Rachel admitted sullenly. "But that's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"No," Tyree answered, shaking his head. "It's what you're thinking."

They rode in silence for several miles, the



animosity between them like a third person in the rig.

If only Tyree would go away, Rachel thought crossly. She had never felt angry and confused like this until Tyree entered her life. She had always been content, sure of who she was and what she wanted out of life, proud of Clint, certain he was the only man in the world for her. Even when they were having trouble with Walsh, she had been at peace within herself. But no more.

"It's going to rain," Tyree remarked, breaking into her thoughts.

Surprised, Rachel looked up to find the sky was dark with clouds. Moments later, a jagged bolt of lightning split the darkened skies. And then the thunder came, reverberating across the plains like the echo of distant drums.

They were still five miles from the ranch when the rain came, driven by a fierce wind that flattened the tall yellow grass and sent tumbleweeds spinning crazily down the road. In seconds, Rachel and Tyree were soaked to the skin.

"Any place where we can hole up until this blows over?" Tyree asked, shouting to be heard above the raging storm.

"There's a cabin just over that ridge," Rachel hollered back, pointing to a low rise. "It used to belong to a family named Jorgensen until Walsh drove them out."

With a grunt of acknowledgement, Tyree reined the team off the road and urged them

up the rain-slick slope. It was slow going. The horses slipped constantly in the heavy mud, and only Tyree's firm hand on the reins kept them going.

The cabin was located at the foot of the ridge in a small grove of aspens. It was small, dark, and blessedly dry. It was also well furnished, giving Tyree the impression that the Jorgensen family must have lit out with little more than the clothes on their backs. Except for a thick layer of dust on the furniture and the cobwebs hanging in lacy strands from the ceiling, the cabin looked as if it were expecting the former inhabitants to return at any moment.

Shortly, Rachel and Tyree were huddled side by side before a cheery blaze, wrapped in dry blankets pulled from one of the beds. Outside, the rain came down in icy sheets, accompanied by a howling wind that rattled the cabin door and shook the glass in the windows.

Rachel cast an apprehensive glance at Tyree, who was sitting hunched beside her. He was staring into the flames, a dark, brooding expression on his swarthy countenance as he took long swallows from a flask pulled from his hip pocket.

Rachel huddled deeper into the blanket draped around her shoulders, acutely conscious of the man sitting beside her. Unbidden came the memory of Logan Tyree lying unconscious in bed, his long lean body naked

beneath the sheets. She remembered how shocked she had been the day she caught herself staring at his nakedness, unabashedly admiring the muscles corded in his arms and legs. She had never dreamed a man's body could be beautiful, but Tyree's was magnificent. His belly was flat as a tabletop, ridged with muscle, his chest was broad and lightly furred with curly black hair, his shoulders were as wide as a barn door. Even lying helpless in bed, he had radiated a kind of latent strength and power that she had found both frightening and intriguing.

He had not been so helpless that day in Sunset Canyon. He had taken her boldly. And he had enjoyed it, apparently feeling no shame at taking her maidenhead, no remorse for what he had done.

Rachel swallowed hard as she sensed Tyree's eyes moving over her, felt herself caught in the web of his gaze.

Rachel felt her cheeks grow hot. "If he mentions Sunset Canyon, I shall die of embarrassment," she mused, genuinely distressed, and frantically searched her mind for some safe topic of conversation that would take Tyree's attention away from her and away from the fact that they were alone. Quite definitely alone.

"The gray stallion," Rachel said quickly. "I hear you bought him."

Tyree's knowing grin assured Rachel that he was well aware of what she was trying to



do. "Yeah," he said, willing to go along with her, for the moment. "I gave your old man fifty bucks for him."

"Fifty dollars for a mustang!" Rachel exclaimed. "Why so much?"

"He's worth it," Tyree answered succinctly.

With a sly grin, he offered her the flask and chuckled aloud when she refused to sample the contents.

Another silence fell between them. Rachel fidgeted nervously for a moment, then took a deep breath. "Why are you so secretive about your past?" she queried, determined to make Tyree talk to her, if not about his past, then about something else, because she was afraid if she didn't keep him talking, he would keep drinking until he was drunk. And she was afraid of drunken men. And of the hungry, waiting look that lurked in the back of Logan Tyree's glittering yellow eyes.

"I'm not secretive about it," Tyree countered. He took another long pull from the bottle, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's just not particularly pleasant."

"I'd like to hear about it," Rachel coaxed prettily. "Please?"

Tyree gave her a long probing glance; then, with a shrug, he stared at the flames again, his swarthy face wiped clean of expression.

"My old man was a half-breed Comanche," he began in a voice gone cold and flat. "He was hung for horse stealing before I was born. My mother was a slut. She ran off with a faro

dealer when I was three. Left me with some nuns. They kept me until I was eight or so, and then sent me off to live with a widow lady who needed help running her farm. We didn't get along at all, me and that old lady, and she threw me out. The nuns sent me to live with a rich Yankee family next. Made 'em feel like real Christians, taking in a poor little orphan. But the old man caught me stealing a dollar, and he sent me packing.

"My next home was with a preacher and his wife. I lasted there about six months, then it was back to the nuns. I guess I was about ten when an old German couple took me in. They were really just looking for some cheap help, but they were pretty decent people, and I might have stayed with them and turned into a dirt farmer if the Apaches hadn't raided their place when I was twelve. The Indians killed the old couple and took me back to their village."

"Goodness!" Rachel exclaimed. "Weren't you scared?"

"No. I liked living with the Indians." His voice grew less harsh. "They were supposed to be savages, but they were the only people who ever gave a damn about me. The only ones who ever cared about what I wanted, or what I thought."

"If you were happy with the Indians, why didn't you stay?"

"Things happen," Tyree said curtly.

"What things? Why did you leave?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Rachel." Scowling, he took a quick drink, and then another. His fingers were white around the flask.

"What is it?" Rachel asked curiously. "You look like you're about to explode!"

"Dammit, I said I don't want to talk about it!"

"I'm sorry," Rachel murmured contritely. "I just thought it might help if you got it off your chest."

For a moment, Tyree looked at her as if she were completely insane. Help? Nothing had ever helped. In the beginning, he had looked for solace in whorehouses and saloon brawls and when that didn't ease the pain caused by Red Leaf's death, he had turned to drink. But that hadn't helped either.

Abruptly, Tyree began to laugh, a harsh bitter laugh filled with pain. Too late, Rachel wished she had not pried into something that was none of her business.

"So you think talking might help," Tyree drawled gruffly. "Let's talk about it then! I lived with the Indians for thirteen years. Learned their language. Prayed to their gods. Fought their enemies. Married one of their women. It was a damn good life. And then one day I took her hunting with me."

He paused, as if seeing it all in his mind. "We were on our way home when six white men attacked us. One of them decked me with a rifle butt. Knocked me out cold. When I



came to, she was dead. They hadn't killed her right away, though. They raped her first. And when they were through, they mutilated her body, hacked off her fine black scalp, and rode away."

"Tyree, I'm so sorry," Rachel whispered, stricken by the grotesque images his words had evoked. "So very sorry."

"So were they, when I caught up with them."

"You killed them." It was not a question.

"Damn right. And they died hard." Tyree stared at her, his eyes glittering like shards of bright yellow glass. "Shall I tell you how they died?"

Rachel shook her head. She was not surprised to learn Tyree had killed those six men. It was no less than she had expected. No less than they deserved.

With a shrug, Tyree raised the flask, draining it in a single swallow. For a moment, he stared at the empty container as if it had betrayed him. Then, muttering a vile oath, he hurled the bottle across the room where it struck a wall and shattered into a thousand sparkling pieces.

"You loved her," Rachel murmured, her voice tinged with wonder. It was hard to imagine Tyree loving anyone. He seemed so hard, so self-sufficient.

"More than my life," Tyree said flatly.

"Was she beautiful?"

"Yeah." Tyree's voice grew soft, almost

wistful. "Her hair was long and thick, black as sin. Her eyes were dark, dark brown and always filled with laughter. She was just a kid, no more than fifteen or sixteen when I married her. All the young bucks wanted her, but she loved me." Tyree laughed softly. "That was the miracle, you know. She loved me."

Tyree's eyes were naked with pain when he faced Rachel again. It was the first time she had seen the real Logan Tyree. Not the arrogant gunman who was a law unto himself, but the man who had experienced a terrible loss and was still hurting deep inside. It was an awful thing, Rachel thought compassionately, to see a man's soul laid bare.

"You were wrong, Rachel," Tyree muttered brokenly. "Talking doesn't help."

Tyree laughed bitterly and Rachel realized he was more than a little drunk.

"Drinking doesn't help, either," Tyree mumbled. "Nothing helps."

"I'm sorry, Tyree. I never knew. I never dreamed—"

"It's been ten years," Tyree said, staring into the dancing flames. "Ten long years. You'd think it would stop hurting after ten years."

Pity and compassion welled in Rachel's breast. How tragic, to love someone as dearly as Tyree had loved his Indian wife, and then lose her in such a dreadful way. No wonder he was bitter.

Thinking only to comfort him, Rachel drew

Tyree close, cradling his dark head against her breast as if he were a small child in need of solace. But Tyree was not a child, and his hands were sure and strong as they slid around Rachel's waist, drawing her against him. His mouth closed over hers, stifling her surprised gasp. She had not meant to encourage him, only to let him know she cared.

Tyree's kiss was not gentle. Rather it was filled with raw primal passion and a deep yearning hunger. Rachel's first thought was to resist, but she sensed that Tyree needed her, needed to feel the strength of her love, to know she understood. With a little sigh, she surrendered to his lips, giving herself over to the exquisite thrill of being in his arms again.

Tyree drew back, a little surprised by her quick capitulation. He had expected her to resist. Perhaps he had hoped she would struggle so that he could hurt her and by hurting her, ease a little of his own pain. But what he saw in her eyes drove all thought of hurting her from his mind.

Rachel whispered his name as she put her hand at the back of his neck and pulled his head down, her mouth seeking his. With a shock, she realized she had been waiting, hoping, for this very thing to happen. It was a bitter thing to admit, but true nonetheless. No matter how she had scorned his attention in the past, no matter how loudly she professed to despise Logan Tyree and everything he stood for, she had secretly yearned for the



wonder of his touch, burned for the taste of his kisses.

Now, as his hands caressed her flesh and his tongue tickled her ear, she was filled with an urgent sense of need. It was a frightening sensation, and yet, strangely satisfying at the same time. He kissed her ardently, his hands lazily exploring the smooth curves and contours of her body, and Rachel moaned low in her throat as wave after wave of sensual pleasure washed over her. His hands and mouth, the merest touch of his naked flesh against her own, aroused her to fever pitch. This was what she wanted. This was where she belonged.

And then Tyree was removing her dress and petticoat, shrugging out of his pants and shirt, and Rachel realized he was not going to settle for a few kisses and a quick caress.

The sight of Tyree's fully aroused male body smothered the fire in Rachel's blood. What was she doing?

Tyree felt the change in her and he drew back. "Change your mind?" he asked thickly.

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"Rachel, I . . ."

She laughed softly, warmed by the desire in his eyes, and by his willingness, however reluctant, to let her go if that was what she wanted. She gazed into his face, so strong, so handsome, and now so vulnerable. Had he been about to confess that he needed her? The thought filled her with tenderness. He *did*

need her, whether he knew it or not. And she needed him.

"Make love to me, Tyree," she whispered, and sighed with pleasure as he made them one, carrying her higher, higher until there was only layer upon layer of ecstasy. His breath was hot upon her skin, his eyes intense, burning with a clear amber flame. He growled her name as his teeth nibbled her neck, her shoulder, her breast, and each touch was more wonderful, more thrilling, than the last.

Rachel cried his name, begging him to satisfy the need he had created and he obliged her willingly, smiling down at her as she let out a whimper of wonder and fulfillment.

Moments later, with a long shuddering sigh, Tyree rolled off her, though he continued to hold her body close against his own.

Outside, the rain continued to fall, its steady roar drowning out all other sound save for the crackling of the flames.

It was dark when Tyree made love to her again. Rachel gloried in his touch, reveling in the wondrous waves of ecstasy that crested and broke and crested again. She was fascinated by his hands—strong brown hands that could so masterfully tame a wild stallion. Angry hands that could callously snuff out a human life. Warm, gentle hands that knew how to arouse the sensuous hunger sleeping in a woman's soul.

Later, with Tyree's arm lying heavily across her stomach, Rachel stared thoughtfully into

the darkness. So this is love, she mused, this wonderful sense of peace and contentment. She glanced fondly at the man sleeping beside her. He had made no mention of loving her, had said nothing of marriage, but surely no man could possess a woman as completely and thoroughly as Tyree had just possessed her without loving her deeply. And she loved him. Perhaps she had loved him all along.

Through eyes warm with affection, Rachel studied the man who had brought her such pleasure. He was lying on his stomach, his face turned toward her. Once, on a picnic, Clint had fallen asleep, and Rachel had studied him in much the same way. She had thought how innocent Clint looked lying there on the grass, almost like a little boy.

But there was no such hint of innocence in Tyree. Even when he was asleep, there lurked about him an air of violence ready to explode at the slightest provocation and Rachel felt that, should she waken him suddenly, he would pounce on her like a tiger roused from its nap.

She touched the scars on his broad back, her fingertips lightly tracing the faint silvery lines. She imagined how he must have looked in prison, his long hair unkempt, his face a hard mask of impotent anger. In her mind's eye, she could see the whip slice through the air, hear the sibilant hiss as the rawhide cut into his flesh. She knew, somehow, that Tyree



had endured the pain without uttering a sound.

At her touch, Tyree stirred and drew her closer. Rachel nestled against him, to be lulled to sleep by the steady rhythm of his heart and the soft tattoo of the rain on the roof.

When she woke, it was morning and Tyree was scattering the coals in the fireplace to make sure the ashes were cold. Rachel smiled up at him uncertainly, feeling all the joy and happiness of the night before shrivel in her breast as Tyree scowled at her. It was obvious he had a whale of a hangover.

"Let's go," he said tersely. "Your old man will be wondering what happened to you."

Rachel dressed quickly, blushing when Tyree happened to glance in her direction. Bewildered, she wondered where all the magic had gone. She still felt the same. Why didn't he? Her mind whirling with confusion, she followed Tyree outside.

The world was fresh and clean and beautiful. Raindrops sparkled on the emerald leaves, shining like tears on a sun-kissed cheek. The sky was a hard bright blue, so dazzling it almost hurt Rachel's eyes just to look at it.

With exaggerated politeness, Tyree handed her into the buggy, took the seat beside her, and shook out the reins.

"Sorry about last night," he apologized gruffly. "I was more than a little drunk and, well . . . things happen."

Rachel felt a cold hand knot around her heart as Tyree casually shrugged off all that had happened between them the night before. The sweet words he had murmured, the intimacies they had shared, it had all been a lie and she had swallowed it whole. What a fool she had been, thinking he cared for her, when any woman would have done as well. She meant nothing to him, nothing at all other than an outlet for his drunken lust.

Suddenly she felt like crying. Instead, she lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. He would never know how deeply his lovemaking had touched her heart.

Staring straight ahead, she said, icily, "When we get back to the ranch, I think you'd better pack up and ride on."

For a long moment, Tyree didn't say anything. Rachel held her breath, hating herself for hoping that he would admit he loved her, that last night had been as wonderful for him as it had been for her, that it hadn't been just a casual encounter in the rain.

But the words she yearned to hear did not come.

"Whatever you want," Tyree drawled. "Giddap, horse."

Ten minutes after they arrived at the Lazy H, he was gone, leaving Rachel to explain his sudden departure to her father.

## *Chapter 9*

The streets of Yellow Creek were pretty much deserted when Tyree rode into town. After settling the gray into the livery stable, Tyree took a room at the Imperial Hotel. It was a small room, cheaply furnished considering the exorbitant price, smelling faintly of stale sweat and old cigar smoke. But the bed was reasonably firm and free of lumps and vermin, and the sheets were clean.

After a quick look around, Tyree dumped his gear on the bed and headed for Bowsher's Saloon. Ordering a bottle of rye whiskey, he carried it to a table in the far corner of the room where he slowly and methodically worked his way to the bottom of the bottle.



The barkeep, a red-headed Irishman named Kelly, had a pot belly and a florid face. He had been a bar dog long enough to know trouble looking for a place to happen when he saw it, and Tyree looked like trouble with a capital T. Periodically, Kelly let his gaze wander in Tyree's direction, but the explosion he anticipated never came. The liquor seemed to have no effect at all on the taciturn gunman, and he was still steady on his feet some hours later when he bought another bottle and left the saloon.

In the weeks that followed, Tyree spent a good part of every day in Bowsher's Saloon, always sitting at the same table with his back to the wall, his right hand never far from the butt of his Colt. Customers came and went, but no one ever approached the grim-faced gunman. There was something about the way he sat there, calmly downing one drink after another; something about the chill look in his eyes that warned others to steer clear of his table. Even the saloon girls lacked the courage to get too close.

Late one night, Flat-Nose Bowsher made one of her rare appearances in the saloon. Despite her years and the disfigurement to her nose, she was still an attractive woman. Her hair was snow-white, her face, though lined by years of hard living, managed to retain a ghost of its former beauty. Like a queen, she glided down the staircase, aware of the whispers and glances her presence elicited from the cus-

tomers. Her narrowed eyes swept the room in a long glance, then came to rest on Tyree. She was not put off by his stern visage, or by the unfriendly look in his eye.

She gave Tyree a wisp of a smile as she pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Evening, Tyree," she said in a raspy voice. "I heard you were in town."

Tyree nodded. He was not in the mood for talk or company, but Flat-Nose was in the mood for both. Calling for a bottle of bourbon, she settled back in her chair.

"Was Yuma as bad as everyone says?" she asked.

Tyree nodded again as he poured her a drink of bourbon.

"I knew they wouldn't keep you there long," Flat-Nose said. "So, you left the Halloran spread. Too tame for you?"

"Flat-Nose, mind your own business," Tyree said mildly.

She laughed at that, a big booming laugh. Still smiling, she emptied her glass and poured herself another drink. The two of them sat there, drinking steadily, until the saloon closed five hours later.

Riders from the Walsh spread drifted into Bowsher's now and then, always in groups of two or three, never alone. Arrogant and impudent, they strutted around the saloon as if they owned the place, bullying the other patrons, harassing the barkeep, making lewd suggestions to the saloon girls.

But they never bothered Tyree.

The Marshal made his rounds twice each night, but Clint Wesley also avoided Tyree, never acknowledging the gunman's presence by so much as a glance.

Which suited Tyree just fine.

Tyree overheard a lot of idle talk as he sat in Bowsher's Saloon, most of it about Annabelle Walsh. Apparently, she had no intention of selling the Slash W, as Rachel had supposed. Indeed, Annabelle seemed to be every bit as land-hungry as her brother had been. Rumors were flying hot and heavy that the Walsh nightriders were operating again, and that one of their victims had been a homesteader who had the audacity to settle on a corner of property claimed by the Slash W. Not only that, but there were a lot of new men hiring on for Annabelle, and they weren't all cowhands.

But over and above all the gossip, the men talked excitedly about Annabelle Walsh herself. She was some looker, they said, with a mane of thick red hair and eyes the color of polished jade. She had a hell of a figure, too, if they were to be believed, and flaunted it by wearing low-cut peasant blouses and tight-fitting pants.

But the news that really made Tyree sit up and take notice was the five thousand dollar bounty Annabelle was offering for the name of the man who had killed her brother.

There was a lot of speculation on the subject of who had gunned Walsh, and Logan



Tyree was the prime suspect. But it was just talk. There were no facts, no evidence, no witnesses. Nevertheless, Tyree could not help wondering if Annabelle would regard the hearsay as idle gossip, or accept it as gospel.

He was thinking about pulling up and leaving Yellow Creek the night he stepped out of Bowsher's Saloon and found himself surrounded by five men armed with rifles and shotguns. Tyree was reaching for his Colt when a rifle barrel slammed into his right side.

"I wouldn't," warned the rifleman, and Tyree slowly raised his hands over his head.

One man, dressed in a fancy shirt with pearl buttons and a sheepskin vest, stepped forward and relieved Tyree of his hardware. Another man, younger than the others, tied Tyree's hands behind his back. That done, the men hustled Tyree down a dark alley that dead-ended against a two-story brick building.

A big bull of a man stepped out of the pack, a half smile on his thick lips. "We've got a message for ya from Miz Walsh," the man drawled in a voice as deep as six feet down. "She don't want any gunmen running around Yellow Creek that ain't on the payroll, so we're here to make ya an offer."

Tyree glanced with wry amusement at the man who stood before him like a solid wall of flesh. "Say your piece," Tyree muttered sardonically. "Doesn't look like I'm going anywhere for awhile."

The big man grinned, showing crooked yellow teeth. "You're smarter than I thought, 'breed. Well, here's the deal. Either you ride for the Slash W, or you ride outta town now, tonight."

"That's your offer?"

"That's it."

Tyree let out a slow sigh. He had been planning to ride on, but all that was changed now. To ride on would look like he'd been run off, and he couldn't live with that.

"Well, you can tell your boss lady that I'm obliged for her offer," Tyree said evenly, "but I'm not looking for work just now."

"That your final say on the matter?"

"That's it."

The big man shook his head sadly. "I guess you ain't so smart after all."

Tyree felt all his muscles tense as the big man handed his rifle to the youngster who had lashed Tyree's hands together.

There was a moment of silence, then Annabelle's men began to move. The man in the sheepskin vest grabbed Tyree's bound arms so he couldn't make a break for it. Another man went to stand watch at the mouth of the alley. The big man and a dark-skinned Mexican sporting a black eye patch stood before Tyree, flexing their muscles and cracking their knuckles, the lust for blood showing clearly in their eyes.

And then it began. One blow following hard on the heels of the last, pounding into Tyree's

flesh with smooth, steady precision, smashing into his face and throat, driving deep into his belly. A knee sent sharp slivers of pain racing through his genitals. A hard right cross sliced his cheek to the bone. There was blood in his mouth, his nose.

The faces of his attackers rushed toward him, then receded, like waves breaking on the sand. His vision blurred and there was a loud roaring in his ears. Vaguely, he wondered if Rachel would brand him a coward for not trying to defend himself. But only a fool tried to buck insurmountable odds, and Tyree had known from the beginning that Annabelle's men did not intend to kill him. Not this time.

And so he took the awful beating, carefully imprinting the face of each man in his memory—making special note of the two men whose fists were brutally punishing his flesh. Sooner or later, they would meet again.

After what seemed like hours but was, in reality, no more than ten minutes, the big man hissed, "That's enough, Rafe," and the blows came to a merciful halt.

The young kid cut Tyree's hands free and Tyree fell to his knees, panting for breath, his whole body throbbing with pain.

But they were not through with him yet. The big man knocked Tyree flat, while the man called Rafe pinned Tyree's right hand to the ground, palm down.

"Miz Walsh had a feeling you wouldn't cooperate," the big man said. "But if you've



got any sense at all, you'll hightail it outta town while you can still walk, 'cause if we see your ass in town again, we'll drop you cold."

The man at the mouth of the alley called, "Hey, Larkin, what the hell's taking so long?"

"Shut up, Harris," the big man snarled. Then, to Tyree, "Just in case you ain't got the sense to skedaddle, me and Rafe, here, decided to put your gun hand outta commission. Permanent-like."

Larkin was moving as he spoke. Grabbing his rifle from the youngster, he brought the butt crashing down on Tyree's pinioned right hand. There was a sickening crunch as skin and bone splintered beneath solid wood. Tyree's body shuddered convulsively; a low groan rumbled in his throat as waves of excruciating pain shot through his hand and arm.

As if from far away, he heard the sound of footsteps as Annabelle's men left the alley. The man in the sheepskin vest kicked Tyree in the ribs as he passed by.

The big man, Larkin, was the last to leave and he chuckled maliciously as he stepped on Tyree's shattered hand, grinding his boot heel into the torn flesh. The pain was unbearable and Tyree uttered a hoarse cry of agony as darkness closed in on him, mercifully dragging him down, down, into nothingness . . .

When he regained consciousness, it was after midnight. For a long time, he remained inert, trying to pretend that the pain radiating

from his right hand belonged to some other poor bastard.

Larkin. Rafe. Harris. The names pounded in his skull, throbbing to the relentless beat of the pain hammering in his right hand. The ground was hard and cold beneath him, the air chill.

"Damn, you can't stay here all night," Tyree muttered through clenched teeth, and forced himself to his knees, and then to his feet. There was a sharp stabbing pain in his side and he quietly cursed the man who had kicked him while he was down.

Hanging onto the wall for support, he made his way down the alley. The broken rib tortured him with each breath, and he was panting like a blown mustang by the time he reached the street.

The gray stood hipshot at the rail of Bowsher's Saloon some ten yards away. Ten yards that looked like ten miles—and damn near felt like it as he staggered across the moonlit street. A quiet word to the stud sent the animal to its knees and Tyree congratulated himself on having had the foresight to teach the horse such a valuable trick.

Gritting his teeth, he stepped into the saddle. Every muscle in his body shrieked in protest as the gray lurched to its feet. For a moment, the world reeled drunkenly; when it stopped, he took a good look at his right hand. Swollen, caked with dirt and blood, it looked

more like a slab of chewed-up meat than a human hand.

Indecision held Tyree motionless for a long moment. Unarmed, his gun hand useless, he was as vulnerable as a newborn babe. It was a new and decidedly uncomfortable feeling.

He grinned wryly as he wheeled the gray around and headed for the Lazy H. He would not be welcome at the Halloran spread, he mused ruefully, but he had no place else to go.

Rachel sat before her dressing table, absently brushing her hair. Tyree had been gone for almost five weeks. It seemed a lifetime. Funny, how all the joy of life seemed to have ridden away with him. She missed his sardonic laughter, his occasional ribald remarks, the sight of his lean, hawk-like face grinning at her from behind a long black cigar, an expectant look dancing in his amber eyes. She had often complained about his laziness, but now she missed seeing him lounging on the front porch steps, his hat pulled low, his legs stretched negligently before him. She remembered how considerate he had been when she sprained her ankle, how tenderly he had cared for her, the intimate dinners they had shared. She remembered dancing with him in the moonlight, his arms tight around her waist, his eyes caressing her. She remembered the night at the Jorgensen cabin . . . felt her cheeks grow hot with the memory. What a



fool she had been, to think Logan Tyree had actually cared for her, that he could care for anybody. It had all been a monstrous joke, a cruel, cruel joke. How he must have laughed at her . . . silly country girl, to be so easily wooed and won. If only she could stop remembering. If only it didn't hurt so much. If only she didn't care.

She had filled her days with work, cleaning and polishing and waxing, as if her very life depended on spotless floors, shiny furniture, and gleaming windows. She sought out Carol Ann's company, forcing herself to laugh and gossip and flirt as if she didn't have a care in the world. She went out of her way to be nice to Clint. She volunteered to teach a Sunday School class, insisted on helping out at the Watkins place when Mabel Watkins broke her leg.

But endless chores and the company of other people failed to ease the ache in her heart. Night after night she lay awake, staring at the ceiling, remembering.

She dropped the hairbrush onto the dressing table and stared at her reflection in the mirror. How had it happened? How had a man she had once despised managed to work his way so deeply into her heart? Did she really love him, or was it just lust?

She frowned at her image. It wasn't just base desire, she mused. She wanted to comfort him, to make him forget the Indian woman who had been killed so savagely. She

wanted to blot out the horrors of prison, to wipe out all the unhappiness of his past and replace the misery with joy. She wanted to erase the hard lines of pain and hurt from his face, to see him smile, hear him laugh, bear his children. Tyree, Tyree. If only she could forget him . . .

A faint noise interrupted her melancholy thoughts and she cocked her head toward the door, listening. And then it came again, a faint knock on the front door. She felt a mild twinge of apprehension as she stood up, drawing her blue cotton wrapper around her. Cahill and her father were spending the night out on the range, and she was alone in the house.

Belting her robe snugly around her waist, Rachel padded barefoot down the carpeted stairway, paused to light the lamp on the table beside the front door before calling, "Who's there?"

"Tyree."

Tyree! Rachel felt her pulse quicken at the thought of seeing him again, felt her cheeks flame as the memory of the night they had shared at the Jorgensen place leaped to the forefront of her mind. Anger followed hard on the heels of that memory. He had used her to satisfy his drunken lust, letting her believe what they shared had been something beautiful when it had been sordid and ugly. How dare he come back to the Lazy H. She would send him packing, and right quick!

Hot words rose in her throat as she opened the door, but she never uttered them. One look at Tyree stilled her tongue and cooled her anger.

"Good Lord," she gasped. "What happened to you?"

"Annabelle Walsh set her dogs on me. Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course. Here, sit down."

She hovered over him as he eased into one of the big overstuffed chairs in the parlor, her sky-blue eyes reflecting the horror of what she saw. Tyree's face was swollen, pale as death beneath the multicolored bruises and drying blood. Both of his eyes were puffy and turning black; his mouth was cut in several places, there was a jagged gash in his left cheek. His shirt hung in tatters, exposing his lean torso and she saw that his chest, too, was a mass of bruises and angry red welts. And his right hand . . . she turned away, fighting the urge to vomit.

"Not a pretty sight, is it?" Tyree muttered. "Damn, it hurts like hell. You got any whiskey?"

"I'll get it. Just sit tight."

Tyree leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. Every breath was an effort, but the pain caused by his broken rib was nothing compared to the constant pulsing pain in his hand and he swore under his breath, cursing Annabelle Walsh and her sadistic night riders.

Rachel returned shortly, carrying a tray



laden with salve, bandages, scissors, and a tall bottle of scotch whiskey.

Tyree reached for the bottle and took a lengthy swallow as Rachel began working on his hand. He flinched involuntarily each time she touched him, swore aloud as she cleaned the wound with a disinfectant that stung like hell.

Going to the kitchen again, she returned with a bowl of warm water, and one of cold. Tyree grimaced as she placed his injured hand in the cold water in hopes of reducing the swelling. While his hand soaked, she began sponging the blood from his face and chest with a soft cloth dipped in warm water.

"Tyree, I can clean up the blood and bandage the cuts on your face and chest, but your hand . . . I don't know anything about setting bones that badly crushed." There was a tremor in her voice, and her eyes were dark with worry when she met his gaze. "I think I can splint your fingers," she went on uncertainly, "but I don't know what to do about the rest. You need a doctor."

"What about the sawbones in Yellow Creek?"

"He's gone back east to visit his daughter. She had a baby last month."

"Damn."

"The only other doctor is over fifty miles away. I . . . I can take you in the buggy, if you like."

Tyree loosed a long sigh. Riding fifty miles

across rough, unbroken country with a busted rib and a ruined gun hand was out of the question.

"Shit, Rachel," he murmured wearily, "just do the best you can, but do it the hell now."

With a nod, Rachel removed what was left of Tyree's shirt and began to dab disinfectant on the wounds on his chest and face. The gash in his cheek was deep and he swore aloud as she bandaged it. Another scar, she mused, when he had so many. His side was badly bruised and discolored.

It was nearing two a.m. when Rachel taped the last bandage in place. Tyree was quite a sight. A wide strip of cloth was swathed around his middle to support his broken rib, a square of gauze covered the gash in his cheek. His face was swollen and purple, one eye was nearly swollen shut. His right hand was splinted and loosely wrapped.

With a sigh, Rachel stood up, one hand pressed against her aching back. She had done her best to mend the damage to Tyree's hand, and she knew, with real regret, that her best had not been good enough. With luck, he would eventually regain the use of his right hand, but only for the simplest tasks. He would never fast-draw a gun with that hand again. She knew it as surely as she knew her own name. And so did Tyree. The knowledge was clear in his eyes, and in the bitter twist of his mouth.

Tyree got slowly to his feet, each movement

an effort. "Thanks, Rachel," he murmured. "I wouldn't have come here if I'd had anywhere else to go."

"It's all right." She lowered her eyes, suddenly shy in his presence. So much had passed between them and yet, for all that, he seemed like a stranger. "The spare bedroom is still empty," she said in a low voice. "You're welcome to stay until you're feeling better."

"No."

She had not expected him to refuse, nor had she thought to feel such regret when he spoke of leaving.

"You're welcome to stay," she repeated. "Really."

"I can't," Tyree said wearily. "I need a place to hole up, someplace where no one will think to come looking for me."

"But you just said you had nowhere else to go. Besides, you're in no fit condition to ride. Not tonight, anyway."

"Oh? How the hell do you think I got here?"

"But where will you go?" Her concern was evident in her voice, but Tyree did not seem to notice.

"Out to the Jorgensen place," Tyree answered as if the idea had just occurred to him. "I'd be obliged if you'd keep my whereabouts to yourself."

Rachel nodded. Once word got out that Tyree's gunhand was ruined, he would be a sitting duck for any bounty hunter in the territory. Anyone catching him off-guard



would have no trouble getting the drop on him. She thought fleetingly of Clint.

"You'll need a gun," she said, thinking aloud. "Pa's got an extra one in his room. You'll need some food, too, and a clean shirt."

Before he could argue or agree, she began gathering the items she had mentioned. With a sigh, Tyree sat down again. Closing his eyes, he rested his head on the back of the chair. Damn, but he was tired. It would be so pleasant to stay at the Lazy H and let Rachel take care of him. He had missed her more than he cared to admit. But he could not stay. Annabelle's men would not waste any time bragging about how they had whipped Logan Tyree, smashed his gunhand, and sent him running. Once word got around that he was hurt, he would be fair game for anyone who felt like hauling him into the nearest lawman.

And he was not going back to jail. Not now. Not ever.

"Tyree?"

"Yeah?" It was an effort to open his eyes.

Rachel was standing before him, a burlap bag in one hand, a shirt and an old Walker Colt in the other. With a low groan, he stood up, reaching for the shirt with his good hand.

"Here, let me help you," Rachel said quickly.

Halloran's shirt was a trifle snug through the shoulders and the sleeves were a couple of inches too short, but it was better than nothing. Tyree accepted Rachel's help because he

had no choice, but it galled him nevertheless. She could see that. He was a man who did not take kindly to depending on others.

Wordlessly, she handed him the gun. The barrel of the old Colt was too long to fit into his holster, so he shoved the gun into the waistband of his pants.

"Thanks," he said gruffly. Brushing her cheek with his left hand, he picked up the sack of food and left the house.

Peering out the front window, Rachel watched Tyree hang the sack over the saddle horn. Saw his face go gray with pain when he accidentally jarred his right hand as he pulled himself into the saddle. Once mounted, he sat there for several moments before he reined the stallion north toward the old Jorgensen place.

Rachel watched him ride away into the darkness, bewildered by her feelings. He had used her and abused her. He had taken her as callously as he would have taken some cheap saloon girl. And yet, inexplicably, it grieved her to see him in pain, to know he was alone and hurting.

She stayed at the window, staring down the empty road long after Tyree was out of sight.

## *Chapter 10*

*The* cabin was cold and dark, empty of life save for an owl perched on one of the overhead beams, its bright yellow eyes blinking in the sudden light as Tyree lit a lamp. With a faint rustle of wings, the owl flew out into the night. Tyree stared after the bird, frowning. The Apache believed an owl was a bad omen, a forerunner of death.

Moving sluggishly, Tyree went outside, slipped the rigging from the gray before turning him loose in one of the pole corrals located behind the shack.

Inside again, he dropped his warbag on the floor, barring the door behind him. Pain slashed through him with every move, and he cussed long and loud as he eased down on the



lumpy mattress, his left arm thrown across his forehead, his right hand pillowed on his chest.

Outside, the wind came up, whispering mournfully as it blew across the valley. Tyree stared out the curtainless window, his thoughts grim as he watched the clouds drift across the inky sky. It would be weeks before his right hand healed, and even then it would likely be as useful as teats on a boar. And until then, what? He had money, but didn't dare show his face in Yellow Creek to buy supplies as long as he was crippled up. He could ride on, he mused grimly, but the next town was over fifty miles away, and he was too damn sore to travel that far. And too damn mad!

Unconsciously, he stroked the smooth walnut butt of the Walker Colt jutting from his waistband. There were five men who had a debt to pay and by damn, he meant to see they paid it. In full.

Courting thoughts of vengeance, Tyree fell into a troubled sleep . . . and sleeping, began to dream—dark dreams peopled with the skeletal images of men he had killed. The ghost of Job Walsh materialized in the midst of the others, his eyes burning like twin coals plucked from the bowels of hell. With a death's-head grin, Walsh drew his gun, cocked the hammer, sighted down the barrel. Tyree saw himself grinning confidently as he reached for his own gun. But his hand refused to obey his mind's command. Puzzled, he glanced down at his right hand, screamed in horror at the gnarled and distorted claw grow-

ing from the end of his arm and screamed yet again as his left hand withered before his eyes. Helpless now, he looked up to find Walsh laughing at him, laughing like a crazy man as he pulled the trigger again and again . . .

Tyree woke in a cold sweat. The bandages on his right hand made a white blur in the shadowy darkness. He stared at his ruined hand for a long time before sleep claimed him again.

He woke the following morning feeling ill-tempered and sore as hell. Scowling blackly, he touched a match to the wood stacked in the fireplace, dumped some coffee into the battered coffeepot, and put it on the fire to boil. Rummaging in his warbag, he pulled out a slab of bacon, sliced it awkwardly with his left hand, dropped the pieces in a cast-iron skillet. There were a half-dozen biscuits in the sack, and he ate them with the bacon, washing it all down with gulps of hot black coffee.

With breakfast over, he pulled a set of hobbles from his pack and went out to check on the gray. The clear morning air was blue with the sound of Tyree's angry curses by the time he had the hobbles in place. That done, he turned the stud out to graze on the sparse yellow grass growing around the cabin.

He spent the day drowsing in the sun, letting its warmth bake the ache from his battered body. Sitting there, he found himself thinking of Rachel and wishing she didn't have such a low opinion of him. He frowned as he recalled how she had flung his past in his

face, taunting him with the men he had killed, like the supposedly unarmed man he had shot in Amarillo. True, the man hadn't been armed in the usual sense of the word, but he had been swinging a double-bitted axe that was every bit as lethal as a six-gun. And then there was that helpless woman. Rita Lacey, her name had been, wife of Tom Lacey, one of the fastest gunmen this side of the Missouri. Tyree had killed Lacey in a saloon brawl, and Rita had come looking for her husband's killer, shotgun in hand. And Tyree had killed her. He hadn't liked killing a woman, especially a woman as attractive as Rita Lacey had been, but what the hell. It had been him or her. And it wasn't her house that had burned down, but an El Paso crib where Rita worked part-time.

And as for the man he had reportedly shot in the back without even a call, shit, the man had never existed except in the mind of whoever set the story in motion. Of course, there were dozens of other men he *had* killed. A sheriff in Texas. A Pinkerton man in Abilene. A drunken cowhand in Dodge. A double-dealing gambler in Tombstone who tried to palm a fifth ace. The list was endless, but he had never regretted killing any of them. He had chosen the path he rode, and he would ride it to the end.

Tyree frowned as he pulled his thoughts back to the present, and Rachel. His only regret in life was taking her virginity. She was a lovely young woman, much too good for the



likes of a washed-up gunfighter. And too good for a man like Clint Wesley, too.

Wesley. Tyree spat into the dirt. Wesley wasn't a bad kid, but unless he got rid of that badge, or got a lot better with his gun, he wasn't going to live long enough to marry Rachel, or anyone else. A green kid packing a gun was just asking for trouble.

The days passed with annoying slowness. Inactivity made Tyree restless and irritable; his inability to use his left hand with the same sureness and dexterity as he had used his right hand made him angry and bad-tempered. Cooking, eating, shaving, bathing, dressing, looking after the stallion, even combing his hair—all the simple everyday tasks he had once performed with ease now took twice the time and required twice the effort and concentration.

Thoughts of vengeance crowded his mind every time he looked at his ruined hand, and he spent long hours plotting the demise of the five men responsible.

As his strength increased, he took long walks to pass the time. Sometimes he took the gray stud along for company. The horse trailed at his heels like an overgrown puppy.

He played countless games of solitaire, cussing mightily every time he tried to shuffle the cards.

He was about out of food, cigars and patience when Rachel showed up at the cabin door.

"I hope you don't mind a little company," she said by way of greeting. She was glad to see he was looking much better. His face was no longer swollen, though it was still slightly discolored. The gash in his cheek had scabbed over; it would leave a ragged scar. She noticed he had not shaved in several days.

"Come on in," Tyree invited. "Sit down. What brings you clear out here? Come to gloat?"

"Of course not. I . . . I just thought you might be a little lonesome."

"Did you?"

Rachel lowered her lashes, unwilling to meet his probing gaze. Regaining her composure, she looked up and smiled. "You look like you could use a shave," she remarked, resisting the temptation to reach out and stroke his beard.

"Reckon so," Tyree agreed, rubbing his left hand across the dark stubble sprouting on his jaw.

"This place could use some cleaning up, too," Rachel observed, glancing with distaste at the dirty dishes stacked in the sink, and at the empty bottles and papers piled in one corner.

"Yeah," Tyree muttered glumly. "And the window is dirty and the blankets need washing, and the floor needs sweeping. And, dammit, I need a drink."

Rachel's laugh was soft and musical, like the purling of spring water over a mound of

mossy stones. "Poor baby," she crooned, "got a broken hand and can't go into town."

Tyree's deep amber eyes glittered angrily. "Dammit, Rachel, it's not funny!"

"I know," she said, instantly contrite. "Everyone is wondering what happened to you. Larkin and his bunch are bragging about how they whipped you and ran you out of town."

"I'll bet they are."

"Yes." Rachel smiled up at him, her eyes twinkling merrily. "The way they tell it, you were tougher than Hickock and Cody rolled into one."

Tyree snorted derisively. "But not too tough for Larkin and his thugs, right?"

"Right. They're boasting, modestly, of course, that they went through you like a hot knife through butter."

"They'll pay dearly for that bit of bravado," Tyree vowed quietly. "Damn, I wish I had a drink."

"Would you like me to ride into Yellow Creek and buy you a bottle?"

"Yeah. And some ammunition. And a holster for a left-handed draw. And a box of the best long nines the town has to offer."

"Are you going to live on cartridges and cigars?" Rachel asked dryly.

"If I have to."

"Be serious. How's your food supply holding up?"

"Cupboard's about bare. Here." He pressed



a wad of bills into Rachel's hand. "Buy whatever you think looks good."

"I'll see what I can do. Tyree?"

"You need more money?"

"No, this is plenty. Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask."

"Why did you become a gunfighter?"

Tyree regarded her for a long moment while he considered and discarded several answers, and then he shrugged. "A man has to do something for a living."

"I'm sure you could have found another line of work if you had tried."

"Sure. I could have swamped out saloons for two bits a day."

"Can't you ever be serious!" Rachel snapped.

"I am being serious. Take a good look at me, honey. I'm a 'breed. Nobody's gonna give me a job that amounts to anything. Besides, I like what I do."

"I can't imagine why. Just look at you. You can't even ride into town for fear of being shot at, or arrested. Why don't you quit?"

"I can't," he retorted, somewhat bitterly. "No matter where I go, there's always someone who knows me, some young punk who thinks he's faster than I am, and won't rest until he takes a stab at proving it."

"Have you ever tried to quit?"

"Once. I went to California. Cut my hair. Changed my name. Grew a beard. But it didn't work. I'd only been there a week or so when

somebody recognized me. Next thing I knew, I'd killed two men and I was on the move again. So I figured, what the hell. Might as well cash in on it. And I have."

"You could try again. To quit, I mean."

"Maybe."

Tyree's eyes probed Rachel's, wondering what lay behind her questions, and her sudden silence.

"I'd better be going," Rachel announced abruptly. "I'll be back tomorrow with your supplies."

"Rachel—"

"Yes?" She looked up at him, her heart aching to hold him, to mother him, to feel his mouth on hers. She did not like to think of him staying in such a dreary place alone, with no one to care for him, to love him.

"I seem to be thanking you for something every time I turn around."

"There's no need," she said quickly, and hurried out of the cabin before she did something foolish, like throw herself into his arms.

Rachel rode into Yellow Creek early the following morning. Mrs. Thorngood eyed her with open curiosity as she ordered a box of long nines and four boxes of ammunition. She was ordering flour, bacon, sugar, salt and canned goods when Clint entered the store. He smiled warmly when he saw Rachel standing at the counter.

"Morning, Rachel," Wesley said, coming to stand beside her. He glanced at the cigars and cartridges stacked on the counter, then

turned an inquiring eye on Rachel. "Your old man take up smoking cigars?"

"No," Rachel said, not meeting his eyes. "They're for Candido."

Wesley nodded, though he could not remember ever having seen the Mexican wrangler smoke anything but a pipe. "Everything okay out at the ranch?"

"Yes, fine," Rachel answered quickly. "Are you coming for dinner Sunday?"

"You bet. There's going to be a dance at the Grange on Saturday night."

"Sounds like fun."

"Pick you up at seven?"

"I'll be ready. I've got to go now, Clint," Rachel said, picking up her order and placing it in a burlap bag. She paid Mrs. Thorngood, smiled at Clint, and left the store.

Wesley stared after her, a bemused expression on his face. Something was wrong, but what?

Tyree shoved the heavy old Colt into the waistband of his pants and left the cabin. After a quick look around to make sure he was alone, he unloaded the Colt and replaced the weapon in his belt. Then, drawing a deep breath, he palmed the gun.

Like most gunfighters, he could shoot with his left hand, though his aim was only fair and his draw was nothing to brag about. True, there were gunmen who made a big deal about wearing two guns, and a couple of them were as fast with one hand as the other. But



for a man who was good, one gun was usually enough to get the job done, because if you couldn't hit your target with six shots, you weren't likely to get six more, not if you were shooting at something that was shooting back.

Tyree drew the Colt with his left hand again and again, getting the feel of it, getting used to the weight and the balance. He practiced all morning. It was good to hold a gun again, good to feel the smooth walnut butt cradled against his palm:

He was still working on his draw when Rachel rode up. Tyree had taken off his shirt and she stared at his well-muscled torso, feeling a sudden stab of desire at the sight of so much masculine flesh. He was a big man, yet he moved with the silky grace of a tiger, his muscles rippling in the late morning sun as he turned to face her. His chest was still livid where Annabelle's men had beaten him, his ribs were still tightly bound. His coarse black beard made him look like a pirate, but for all that, he appealed to something raw and earthy deep within her.

"I brought the things you asked for," she said, and blushed under his frank gaze, wondering if he could read the unladylike thoughts tumbling through her mind. "I'll go and put this stuff away. You go on with what you're doing."

It was suppertime when Tyree returned to the cabin. Stepping inside, he could see that Rachel had been hard at work. The cabin's

single window sparkled. The floor was dust-free. The cobwebs were gone from the corners. His blankets had been washed, the bed was freshly made. A red-checked cloth covered the table. He quirked an eyebrow inquiringly when he saw it was set for two. A clean shirt was laid out on the bed, together with a bar of yellow soap and a clean white towel. A basin of hot water was waiting on the counter, his razor beside it. There was a pot of stew simmering on top of the stove, a pan of biscuits warming in the oven.

Tyree whistled softly. "Nothing like a woman's touch."

"You might as well live like a civilized human being while you're here," Rachel retorted sharply, mistaking his compliment for sarcasm.

"Hey, calm down," Tyree admonished. "I like it. It looks . . . nice."

Mollified, Rachel said, "Dinner is almost ready." She looked pointedly at the whiskers sprouting on Tyree's chin. "You have time to shave first."

"Shaving left handed's more trouble than it's worth," Tyree muttered, dragging a hand across his jaw.

"Would you like me to do it?"

"You?" Tyree chuckled. "Hell, I'm game if you are."

Tyree sat in one of the cabin's rickety chairs while Rachel lathered his face and then, very carefully, began to shave him. Her touch was light, her fingers warm on his cheek, and a

sudden tension sprang up between them as she continued to draw the razor across his jaw. Somehow, what had started out as a routine chore suddenly became much, much more, leaving Rachel to wonder how it had happened. She was acutely conscious of Tyree's face only inches from her breast, of his thigh brushing hers as she moved from side to side.

Tyree was thinking about picking her up and carrying her to bed when Rachel wiped the last of the lather from his face and took a step back, head cocked to one side as she admired her handiwork. Seeing the look in Tyree's eyes, she took another step back, putting herself out of his reach.

"Not bad," she declared, offering him a hand mirror she had found in a drawer of the highboy. "What do you think?"

"Better than a barber," Tyree decided. "Maybe I should set you up in business."

"No, thanks. Dinner is ready."

They ate in silence. Darkness came swiftly, enveloping the cabin and its occupants, shutting them off from the rest of the world. Rachel avoided Tyree's eyes as she cleared the table, glad to have something to do with her hands, glad that she could turn her back to Tyree while she washed and dried the dishes. But even then she was aware of his presence only a few feet away.

Leaning back in his chair, Tyree chewed on the end of a cigar, openly admiring the way the lamplight played in Rachel's hair, turning



the honey-blond to gold, finding pleasure in the graceful way she moved as she wiped the dishes and stacked them in the cupboard.

Removing her apron, Rachel ran a slender hand through her hair and coughed nervously. "It's getting late. I've got to go."

"You shouldn't be riding home alone in the dark."

"I'll be all right."

Tyree was about to argue with her when the shrill scream of an aroused stallion cut across the stillness of the night.

"The gray," Tyree remarked. "Your mare must be in season."

Rachel nodded, and then they were running for the corrals behind the cabin.

In the light of the full moon they could see the stud pacing the rail that separated him from Rachel's mare. He had been pacing back and forth for some time as evidenced by the path cut into the soft dirt on his side of the fence. As Rachel and Tyree rounded the corner of the cabin, the stallion sailed over the six-foot fence.

"Tyree, stop him!" Rachel shouted. "I don't want my mare to drop a late foal."

"It's too late. Look!"

Rachel's mare was a maiden mare. Too frightened to run, she stood in one corner of the corral, her dainty head high, her eyes showing white as the stud pranced back and forth in front of her, his neck arched, his tail high. His organ dropped, swelled.

Rachel gasped. "No wonder Morgana's

afraid," she murmured, unaware she had spoken the words aloud.

The gray herded the mare into the center of the corral, nipped her viciously on the right flank when she seemed unwilling to cooperate. Then, with a squeal that sent shivers down Rachel's spine, the gray reared up and mounted the quivering mare.

"Damn!" Tyree breathed. "He's magnificent."

Rachel had to agree. The stallion was magnificent. And though she had seen mares covered before, there was something special about this occasion, and not just because her mare was involved. The other breedings she had seen had been at the ranch under controlled conditions, not like this, with the mare cowed into submission by a stallion that had run wild and free only a few short months ago.

Rachel licked her lips, suddenly conscious of the man standing close beside her, and she sent a furtive glance in his direction. He was like the gray, she thought, blushing furiously. Half-wild and totally unpredictable.

A shuddering sigh wracked the stud as, with a shake of his massive head, he withdrew from the mare to stand with his nose almost touching the ground, his sides heaving mightily.

"Come on, you old reprobate," Tyree called softly, and the stallion followed him docilely into the adjoining corral.

"Let's have some coffee while your mare settles down," Tyree suggested.

"Might as well," Rachel agreed. "The damage is done."

"I'll bet she throws a fine foal," Tyree predicted. "She's a good-looking mare, and the gray has good conformation for a range-bred stallion. I'll bet he's got some Thoroughbred somewhere in his background."

"Could be," Rachel agreed, stepping into the cabin. "He's much too tall for a mustang."

The minute Tyree shut the cabin door, Rachel knew returning to the cabin with him had been a mistake. The mating between the horses had affected Tyree, too. There was a hungry look in his eye, a telltale bulge rising in the crotch of his Levi's.

"I'll put some water on," Rachel said with forced lightness, but Tyree shook his head.

"Well, if you've changed your mind about that coffee, I'll be running along. It's a long way home, and I'm tired." She was babbling, and she laughed self-consciously. "Morgana's probably tired too," she said, and could have bitten her tongue. "So long, Tyree."

"Rachel."

His voice stopped her as she reached for the door latch. Slowly, she turned to face him. "No, Tyree," she whispered. "Please don't."

But she made no move to avoid the hand that reached out to stroke the curve of her cheek. Nor did she turn away when he bent to kiss her.

Hating herself, Rachel let Tyree lead her to the bed and willingly sank down beside him on the lumpy mattress. Later, she would be



ashamed of the brazen way she responded to his touch, would be embarrassed to recall the love words she had whispered in his ear. But not now.

With provocative deliberation, Tyree began to undress her. Slowly, using his good hand alone, he unfastened her shirt and slipped it off her shoulders, then began to remove her jeans. For a moment, his fingers stroked her naked belly and thighs. Rachel stared up at him, her whole body quivering under his burning gaze. He did not take his eyes from hers as he stood up and began to undress. In moments, he stood naked before her and Rachel marveled anew at the span of his shoulders, the spread of his black-furred chest, the length of his legs, the strength in his arms.

With a little cry, Rachel reached for Tyree, pulling him down beside her on the narrow bed, loving the touch of his skin against hers as she explored his scarred body with shameless abandon. She was surprised to find that his lean nakedness did not repel her. Surprised to learn his nakedness excited her, that she thought his body beautiful to behold.

Lying beside Tyree, feeling his hand caress her flesh, tasting his kisses, she felt loved and protected and terribly female. He was so completely masculine, so virile, it made her more glad than ever to be a woman. Oh, but it was wonderful to know that Tyree found her desirable, wonderful to glory in the easy strength of the arms enfolding her, wonderful

the way their bodies came together, as if they had been born to share this one glorious moment . . .

When Tyree woke in the morning, Rachel was gone. The cabin seemed empty without her gentle presence.

Rising, he dressed, ate, and then got to work filing the front sight off the barrel of the Walker Colt so that it wouldn't catch on the holster. That done, he began working on the holster Rachel had brought him, softening it, rubbing it inside and out with oil, shaping it so that the leather fit the gun like a second skin.

When both gun and holster suited him, he blocked everything from his mind and concentrated on drawing the weapon. Ten times, twenty, fifty, a hundred times he drew the heavy Colt until he was satisfied with the way the gun felt in his hand, satisfied that his draw was flawless. Only then did he load the gun.

Long hours of target practice followed. He fired at his target from all angles: with the sun at his back, with the sun in his face, standing, kneeling, prone on the ground. He practiced in full daylight, in the changing shadows of twilight, in moonlit darkness.

Days passed, and he thought of nothing but the Colt, touching it, handling it, until it was like an extension of his hand.

But the nights . . . ah, at night, when he stretched out on the bed, he thought only of Rachel, wondering if she would come to him

again, remembering her warm softness beneath him and the sweet taste of her lips. She had left in the pre-dawn hours, after their lovemaking, no doubt embarrassed by what had passed between them. She had made no mention of returning. Grudgingly, he admitted he missed her, but there was no time to fret over her absence. There was only time to practice with the Colt and he did so from dawn til dark, hoping, in a far corner of his mind, that the long hours of practice would prove to be unnecessary and that, when healed, his right hand would be as good as ever even though he knew that such a miracle was virtually impossible.

Draw and fire. Draw and fire. At a leaf, a rock, a bottle, a tin can. Draw and fire. At a twig, a squirrel, a jar tossed into the air. Remembering, always remembering, the man who had crushed his hand. Always remembering the pain, the anger.

So the days passed, each one the same as the last. Practice with the Colt during the day; dream of Rachel at night.

Eventually, Tyree was satisfied that he could draw and fire the Colt with his left hand as proficiently as he had with his right. Then and only then did he remove the bandages from his right hand.

Face impassive as stone, he studied his hand as if it belonged to someone else. He watched the fingers move, stiff as old leather. Noted that the first three fingers were permanently



deformed; that the skin on the back of his hand was fishbelly white, and badly scarred.

A muscle worked in his jaw when he discovered that he could not make a tight fist. He was standing there, staring at his ruined hand and remembering the face of each man responsible, when Rachel entered the cabin. One look at his face, at the hard set of his jaw and the angry look in his eye, told her clearly that his hand had not healed the way they had hoped it would, the way she had prayed it would.

"Tyree?"

He looked up slowly, surprised to find her there.

"I'm sorry, Tyree. I did the best I could. I . . . I feel like it's my fault."

"Well, it isn't," he said curtly. "Go on home."

"Is there anything I can do before I go?"

"No."

"Please let me help."

"Dammit, Rachel, I don't need your help, and I don't want your pity. Just get the hell out of here and leave me alone!"

Arms akimbo, Rachel glared up at him, a challenge rising in her vivid blue eyes. "Why don't you stop feeling sorry for yourself then?" she demanded crossly. "Just because you can't hold a gun in that hand doesn't mean your life is over."

"A gun!" Tyree snarled. "Shit, I can hardly hang onto a cup of coffee. You ever try sad-

dling a bronc with one hand? Or tying a knot? Or shuffling a deck of cards?"

"My father can do all those things," Rachel replied quietly. "And he lost half an arm."

"You're right," Tyree admitted ruefully. "I am feeling sorry for myself. I guess I was hoping for a miracle." He laughed bitterly. "Imagine me, hoping for a miracle. I can't think of anyone who deserves one less."

"Let me fix you some lunch," Rachel coaxed. "I brought some roast beef and potato salad with me."

"You win. Let's eat."

Tyree sat down at the table while Rachel served him, staring glumly at his right hand while she sliced the meat and dished up the potato salad.

"Tyree?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to eat, or just sit there, brooding?"

"Sorry."

She tried not to stare at him as he endeavored to cut the thick slice of roast beef on his plate with a fork, wondering why she hadn't thought to slice it thin, like she did for her father. As it was, it had to be cut with a knife. And Tyree could not manage both knife and fork with one hand.

Thinking only to help, Rachel reached across the table to cut the meat for him.

It was a mistake. Growling an oath, Tyree hurled his fork against the far wall.

"You gonna feed me, too?" he rasped. And pushing away from the table, he unleashed his pent-up anger and frustration in a string of the most foul epithets Rachel had ever heard.

When he finished, he went to the window where he stood looking out, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

"Tyree—"

"Dammit, Rachel, stop treating me like a kid."

"Then stop acting like one."

"Oh, hell, I'm not used to being waited on. I'm not used to having people do for me. I don't like it. Never have."

"I don't mind."

"I do."

"Tyree, why haven't you ever remarried?"

Tyree swung around to face her, his eyes mirroring his astonishment. "What?"

"You heard me. Why haven't you ever remarried?"

"Are you crazy? What girl in her right mind would marry a gunfighter?"

"I would," Rachel said, and it was a toss-up as to who was more surprised by her unexpected reply, Logan Tyree, or Rachel herself.

Tyree stared at her for several seconds, too stunned to speak. Marriage! Good Lord.

"You can't be serious?" he said, shaking his head.

"But I am."

The corner of Tyree's mouth twitched in a wry grin. "You think the love of a good



woman will make me mend my evil ways?" he asked, amused.

"Don't make fun of me, Tyree."

"I'm not. I just can't believe you mean it. I thought you hated me. You've certainly said so often enough."

"I know, but it isn't you I hate. It's what you stand for."

"It's pretty much the same thing, don't you think?"

"No," Rachel argued softly. "It's not the same thing at all."

For once, Tyree had no quick retort and Rachel could not help smiling. It was the only time she had ever seen him at a loss for words.

Then his face closed against her and he said, flatly, "Go home, Rachel. You'll only get hurt if you stay."

"Why? Don't you care for me at all?"

"That's got nothing to do with it."

"That has everything to do with everything."

"Shit, Rachel, life's not that simple. In the next day or two, I'm gonna kill five men. And sooner or later, I'll probably have to kill Clint Wesley, too. How are you gonna feel about me then? And what about Wesley? I thought you were sweet on him."

"I thought so, too." Rachel dismissed the Marshal with a wave of her hand. "Tyree, come back to the ranch and stay with us. We need you. I need you."

"Dammit, honey, I'm no farmer."

The hand Rachel placed on Tyree's arm was soft and warm and trembling visibly. "Will you come home with me, Tyree?"

"Do you know what you're saying?" Tyree asked gently. "Do you know what you'd be getting? And what you'll be giving up?"

Rachel nodded slowly. Tyree would never be the kind of husband she had dreamed of when she was a young girl. He would never be completely content to live in a small town like Yellow Creek. He would never completely settle down. And though she did not like to think about it, she knew there was a strong possibility that he would tire of her in a year or two and ride out of her life. And yet . . .

She looked at the man standing before her. He was tall and dark. His face was hard, his amber eyes unfathomable. She knew, logically, that Clint would make a far better husband. He was honest, even-tempered, well-liked and respected in the community, a hard worker, a man with ambition and roots. He would make an excellent husband, a good father, a reliable provider. But it was Logan Tyree who made her blood sing with longing, Tyree who made her feel vibrant and alive, Tyree who had captured her heart and soul.

"Will you come with me, Tyree?" she asked again.

Tyree looked at Rachel, and knew he should refuse. He would never make her happy, never in a million years. He could never be the kind of man she wanted, the kind of man she deserved. And yet he could not resist the love

shining bright and clear in her eyes, could not shatter the hope he read in her expression. Or deny that he wanted her.

"I'll come," he agreed. "But only after I've squared a few debts with the Slash W. Does that suit you?"

"Can't you let them go?"

"No."

Tears sparkled in Rachel's eyes as she begged, "Please let them go, Tyree. I can't abide the thought of any more killing."

"It's something I've got to do."

The closeness she had felt with him suddenly shattered, and she took her hand from his arm. "Why can't you just forget it?" she cried out, frustrated by his stubbornness. "Killing them won't make your hand whole again. Nothing will."

Anger flared deep in Tyree's amber eyes. There was hate there, too, and an implacable desire for revenge. And suddenly Rachel thought she knew what was driving him so relentlessly.

"It's your pride, isn't it?" she exclaimed incredulously. "That's why those five men have got to be killed."

"Shut up, Rachel."

But now she was angry, too, and she shouted, "I will not shut up! You're going after those men because they got the best of the great Logan Tyree in a dark alley!"

Tyree did not deny it, only said, stonily, "It's something I've got to do. If you can't live with it, I'll ride on."



"That's not fair and you know it."

"Fair!" Tyree held out his ruined hand and his expression turned ugly. "How can you look at what those bastards did and still talk to me about what's fair?"

"I suppose you'll have to kill Annabelle, too, seeing as how those men work for the Slash W."

"No. The beating was her idea and I could have lived with that. Hell, I've been whipped by experts. But breaking my hand, that was Larkin's idea. And he's going to pay for it."

The fight went out of Rachel then, leaving her drained and empty. "Will you come to me when it's over?"

"You still talkin' marriage?" Tyree asked gruffly.

"Yes."

Tyree stared at her for a full minute, his face inscrutable. Hell, maybe he could change. Maybe, with Rachel's help, he could settle down and become a respectable citizen. And maybe hell would freeze over, he mused wryly. But she was so lovely, so sweet, and perhaps she was his last chance for a decent life. He was almost tempted to forget about the Walsh riders, but he knew he would never rest until they were dead.

"I'll come," he said at last. "When it's over."

"I'll be waiting," Rachel murmured, and left the cabin without a backward glance.

## *Chapter 11*

John Halloran studied his daughter carefully as she prepared breakfast the following morning. Her eyes seemed red, puffy, as if she had spent the night crying. She was unusually quiet, preoccupied, her thoughts obviously worrisome.

"Rachel. Rachel?"

"Yes, Pa?"

"Is anything wrong?"

"No. Pa, I . . . I might be getting married soon."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"You don't seem very happy about it," Halloran remarked.

"I am. Really."

Halloran grinned broadly. "So! Clint finally proposed. Well, I'll be damned."

"No, I . . . Pa, I asked Tyree to marry me."

"Tyree!"

Rachel nodded. "Would you mind? Having him for a son-in-law, I mean."

Halloran shook his head slowly. "No, not if it's what you want. Is that where you've—" Halloran coughed, not knowing exactly how to ask what he wanted to know.

"Yes. I've been meeting him out at the old Jorgensen place."

"So that's where he went to ground," Halloran mused. "I didn't think he'd run far. Not Tyree." Halloran chuckled. "Won't Larkin and his bunch be surprised when they learn they didn't scare him off after all."

Rachel nodded, tears welling in her eyes.

"What is it, honey?" Halloran asked. Reaching out, he laid his hand over hers and gave it a squeeze. "You can tell me."

"Tyree's planning to kill Larkin and the other men responsible for breaking his hand. I tried to talk him out of it, Pa, but he wouldn't listen. He's determined to make them pay for what they did."

Halloran nodded. "Can't say as I blame Tyree, daughter. It was an awful thing they did to him."

"I know, but . . . Oh, Pa, he's killed so many men. I can't stand the thought of more killing. When will it end?"



"Do you love Tyree?"

"Yes," Rachel answered fervently.

"You knew what he was when you asked him to marry you."

"Yes."

"You can't change him, Rachel. You'll either have to learn to live with what he is and hope he'll change on his own, or spend the rest of your life together being miserable. That, or give him up."

"I can't give him up, Pa. I love him so very much."

"I think he's a good man, honey. I think, deep inside, he's everything you want. Everything you need. If I didn't think so, I'd try to talk you out of marrying him." Halloran gave Rachel's hand another squeeze. "When's the big day?"

Rachel smiled through her tears. "I'm not sure. Tyree said he'd come for me when it was over."

Father and daughter looked at each other, neither voicing the thought that lurked in the backs of their minds. Five to one, the odds were. And no matter how good Tyree was, there was always a chance that he couldn't beat the odds.

The next few days were hard on Rachel. She didn't know when Tyree planned to make his move, didn't know how much longer he would practice with the Colt before he felt ready to take on Larkin and the others.

She filled her days with work, dusting, washing, ironing, mending, sweeping, rearranging the furniture, cleaning closets and cupboards, tidying up the attic, waxing and polishing. She pulled an old cookbook out and tried a dozen new recipes. She baked pies and cakes and cookies and bread until her father begged her to stop. She bought several yards of dress goods and began making herself a new wardrobe to please Tyree: a Sunday go-to-meeting dress of soft blue wool because Tyree liked her in blue; a day dress of green-sprigged muslin with a square neck and a wide white sash.

When chores and sewing and baking grew tiresome, she began to take long rides on Morgana. Often, she was tempted to ride out to the Jorgensen place to visit Tyree, but she never did. She had gone to him, offering her love, begging him to marry her. Now he must come to her.

The nights were the worst of all. Lying alone in her bed in the dark, she went over every word, every touch and warm embrace they had shared, remembering the strength of his arms, the magic of his kiss, the sound of his voice. Doubts crowded her mind. What if Tyree had changed his mind? What if he killed Larkin and the other Slash W men and then rode out of Yellow Creek, never to return? What if he were killed?

Doubts and dreams warred within her, but through it all she held fast to her love for

Tyree. She loved him and he loved her. She knew he did even if he had never said the words. She believed it with her whole heart. She had to believe it, or drown in despair.

Each day, as she combed out her hair before the mirror, she whispered, "Today. He'll come today."

And each night, she whispered, with a little less conviction, "Tomorrow. He'll come tomorrow for sure."

And then she cried herself to sleep.

Dawn, and the air was frosty cold. Tyree's breath produced a cloud of white vapor as he saddled the gray. He cussed mightily as he fumbled with the cinch, wondering, ruefully, if he would ever get the hang of doing things one-handed.

Swinging up into the saddle, he reined the stallion toward the Slash W, his face impassive, his mind closed to everything but the five men he intended to kill before the sun went down.

Willie McCoy left the Walsh ranch shortly after breakfast. Gigging his spotted pony into a lively trot, he headed for Yellow Creek. There was a girl in town, a very expensive girl, and he grinned with anticipation as he patted the roll of greenbacks in his jeans. Today he could afford to buy all Ginny's time, and that was just what he intended to do, even if it cost him every cent of the five hundred dollars he



had earned for his part in roughing up Logan Tyree.

Willie frowned as he mulled over that particular job. Annabelle Walsh had promised equal shares for working over the gunman, but Larkin had doled out the money, taking the lion's share for himself and his sidekick, Rafe Hobbs. The others, Harris and Tolman, were good guns, but neither had the guts to argue with Larkin about the split. And neither did Willie McCoy. Better a live coward with a pocket full of money than a dead hero.

Lifting his paint pony to a lope, Willie put Gus Larkin and the others out of his mind and turned his thoughts back to Ginny, and the endless hours of pleasure he would find in her arms.

Tyree reached the Walsh spread just as the sun topped the distant mountains. White-faced cattle stirred at his passing, staring at him out of wild, suspicious eyes. A covey of quail burst from a clump of sagebrush, spooking the gray stallion. Tyree grinned as the stud tossed its head and danced sideways. Damn, but it was good to be alive.

Tyree covered ten miles before he spotted a lone rider off in the distance. Reining the gray to a halt, he dismounted in the cover of a low rise, waiting patiently for the rider to come within range.

Tyree grinned coldly as he recognized the youngest of the Walsh gunnies. Muttering,

"This must be my lucky day," he palmed the Colt, thumbed back the hammer, and stepped into the open.

"Hold it, cowboy," he called, and Willie McCoy pulled his horse to a sharp halt. The young gunman's face went white as he recognized the man behind the gun.

"Hi, kid," Tyree drawled. "Remember me?"

Willie McCoy was scared. Too scared to speak. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down, and then he nodded vigorously.

"Good," Tyree said flatly. "Get those hands up."

McCoy looked at his hands as if he had never seen them before.

"Get 'em up!" Tyree snapped.

Slowly, as if they weighed a great deal, Willie McCoy raised his hands above his head. He screamed with sudden pain as Tyree fired two quick shots, sending a bullet through each of the youngster's palms.

"Tell your friends I'll be waiting for them at Bowsher's," Tyree said to the sobbing youth. Holstering his Colt, he stepped into the saddle and rode toward Yellow Creek.

Tyree left the gray tethered at the rail of Bowsher's Saloon. Inside, he ordered a bottle of rye, carried it to his usual table in the back of the room where he could keep one eye on the door and his back to the wall.

Thoughts of Rachel crowded his mind.

Whatever had possessed him to agree to marry her? Did she really think he could give up drifting and settle down? Did he? Tyree stared at the pale amber whiskey in his glass as, unbidden, came the memory of the life he had shared with Red Leaf. Theirs had been a good marriage, filled with laughter and harmony. He had liked the feeling of belonging to someone, of having someone who belonged only to him. But that had been long ago. He was not the same man now that he had been then.

He emptied the glass in a single swallow, absently poured another drink. He had not shared his life with anyone else since Red Leaf's death. He had shut out the world, and the people in it. Perhaps, with Rachel, he could recapture the magic he and Red Leaf had shared . . .

His melancholy thoughts were interrupted as Flat-Nose Beverly glided over to his table. She looked truly elegant this day, with her silver-white hair piled atop her head and her thin figure clad in a blood-red gown.

"Afternoon, Tyree," she murmured.

"Flat-Nose."

She gave him a ghost of a smile. "Be careful."

Tyree nodded. A moment later, Gus Larkin and his men pushed their way into the saloon.

Tyree stood up, all thoughts of Rachel forgotten. There was no past now, and no future. There was only this moment. Hand hovering



over the butt of his gun, he called to Annabelle's men.

Three wranglers standing at the bar scrambled for cover at Tyree's warning call, tripping over each other and their own feet in their haste to get out of the line of fire.

Kelly swore softly as the trouble he had been expecting ever since the tall gunman first entered his place finally arrived. The barkeep crossed himself as he ducked behind the safety of the solid mahogany bar.

The four Walsh gunmen whirled around as if pulled by the same string. Gus Larkin was fast. His gun was in his hand and seeking a target when Tyree's bullet found him. The heavy .45 caliber slug smashed into the side of Larkin's head and exited amid a red tide of blood and brain tissue.

Tyree's second shot took out the man called Rafe.

Satisfied he had killed the two men he wanted most, Tyree dropped to the floor, rolling to the left and then to the right as he hosed off the remaining rounds in his gun, oblivious to the bullets whizzing around his head like angry hornets.

He swore softly as a chunk of flying lead nicked his arm, gouging a deep furrow in his right shoulder.

In less than a minute, four men were dead.

Rising to his feet, Tyree reloaded the Colt and walked out of the saloon. Swinging into

the saddle, he reined the gray out of town toward the Slash W Ranch.

The Walsh spread was built around a courtyard, Spanish-style. Flowers bloomed in colorful clay pots and hanging baskets. A dozen cages housed twice that many canaries and their cheerful trilling filled the air. A wide veranda circled the house, offering shade from the fierce desert sun.

It was a nice-looking spread. The outbuildings gleamed with a fresh coat of whitewash; the corrals were snug and well-built, filled with blooded horses and a pair of Texas longhorns.

A fat Mexican woman clad in a severe black bombazine dress answered Tyree's knock.

"Where's your mistress?" Tyree demanded brusquely.

"Taking a siesta," the woman replied in stilted English. "Go away."

"You go get her, pronto, or I will," Tyree said firmly. "You savvy?"

"Si, si," the woman answered quickly, and scurried toward the back of the house.

Stepping inside, Tyree closed the door behind him, stood in the entry hall examining his surroundings. The hallway was dark, hung with several paintings of the desert and a sunset. The parlor beyond was a large, high-ceilinged room. Colorful rugs covered the floor, a few smaller ones, Navajo in design, decorated the walls. A sofa and two large

chairs upholstered in dark leather were grouped around a huge stone fireplace. Several oil lamps hung from the ceiling. A life-sized statue of St. Francis stood in one corner, surrounded by lacy ferns and flowering plants. A large mirror hung over the fireplace. A shelf housed a small display of Indian pottery.

Annabelle Walsh entered the room on silent feet. She was tall for a woman, dressed in a simple blue cotton skirt and an off-the-shoulder white blouse which was decorated with tiny blue and yellow flowers. Her hair was rich and red and fell in soft waves around her face and over her shoulders.

She halted six feet away from Tyree, her bright green eyes running over him, appraising him in much the same way a man judged a horse he was thinking of trying.

"You must be Logan Tyree." Her voice was deep, husky, with a sensual quality that kindled a quick desire in Tyree's loins.

He nodded curtly. "And you must be Annabelle Walsh."

"Yes. Would you care for a drink? Food?" She glanced pointedly at the blood caked on his shoulder. "Bandages, perhaps?"

Tyree shook his head. Annabelle Walsh was the most blatantly beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her skin was the color of rich cream, her mouth pouting and red. Full breasts pushed impudently against the thin fabric of her blouse, and he had a crazy urge



to tear away the flimsy material that covered her voluptuous breasts and see if they were real.

A smile of amusement played across Annabelle's lips as she read Tyree's thoughts—thoughts she had seen reflected in the eyes of every man she had ever met.

"Why have you come here?" Annabelle asked.

"To tell you not to send any more of your men after me. And to lay off the Lazy H."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," she replied coolly.

"Then I'll spell it out for you. I killed four of your gunmen less than an hour ago. And if one more cow turns up missing or dead on the Lazy H, I'll come after you."

"The way you came after my brother?"

"Now I don't know what you're talking about," Tyree lied smoothly. "Just remember what I said. If anything suspicious happens out at the Lazy H after today, if one cow gets sick or dies, I'll come after you. And I never miss."

It was not an idle threat, Annabelle was sure of that. He had severely wounded Willie McCoy, now he admitted to killing four of her best men. No doubt he had killed Job, too. Yes, she mused, Logan Tyree was an accomplished killer. He would not hesitate to kill a woman.

Giving her head an impatient toss,

Annabelle smiled a secret smile. Perhaps, instead of fighting against Tyree, she should make him an ally. If she could hire his gun, Halloran's remaining few men would desert the Lazy H like rats fleeing a sinking ship. And if he would not succumb to the lure of money, there were always other enticements. He was interested in her body. Even now he was having trouble keeping his eyes from her breasts and hips. Always, men had looked at her as if she were a melon ripe for the harvest. She had offered herself to other men when they possessed something she desired. And they had always yielded to her charms. Logan Tyree would be no different. For all his arrogance, she was certain he would do as she wished if she made him the right offer.

"Is that all you have to say?" Annabelle inquired coldly.

"I reckon that covers it."

"Very well. Good day, Mr. Tyree."

With some amusement, Tyree realized he had been dismissed. But he made no move to leave the room, and neither did Annabelle Walsh.

Tyree stared openly at the lush figure clad in the blue skirt and virginal white blouse. But there was nothing virginal about Annabelle, he mused. She was a woman who had known many men. The knowledge was bright in her taunting green eyes, and in the pouting smile that curved her full red lips.

But more than that, it rose from her like the musky scent of a mare in heat, alerting any stallion within range.

Unruffled by his steady gaze, Annabelle gestured at Tyree's wounded shoulder. "You really should have that taken care of."

"Yeah."

"I have some salve and bandages in my room."

"Fine."

Annabelle turned on her heel and led the way through the parlor and down a long hall to her bedroom, secure in the knowledge that Tyree would follow her. She smiled smugly as she heard his footsteps start after her. It was always so easy.

Annabelle's room was large and smelled of powder and perfume. A four-poster bed dominated the room. Heavy red velvet draperies were drawn across the windows, shutting out the late afternoon sunlight. A tall rosewood chest of drawers took up most of one wall. A small commode held a pitcher of water and a basin. There was a rosewood armoire, a full-length mirror, a painting of a wild stallion chasing a herd of mustangs hung on one wall.

Tyree removed his shirt and sat on the edge of the bed, his hand idly toying with the soft red velvet spread while Annabelle bandaged his shoulder. He eyed her expectantly, waiting for her to make the next move.

He did not have long to wait.

"I want you to work for me, Tyree," she



murmured. Her fingers stroked his bare arm, caressing the muscles bulging there.

"I already said 'no' once, remember? It cost me a good right hand."

"Change your mind." Annabelle's fingers trailed suggestively down his arm to rest on his thigh. "I'll pay you whatever you ask, within reason."

"Anything?" His hungry eyes traveled to the twin mounds of her breasts, and then to her inviting red lips, which were moist and slightly parted.

Annabelle laughed softly as Tyree's amber eyes devoured her. Men! They were all alike. Always wanting just one thing from a woman.

"I was thinking of a thousand dollars a month," Annabelle said.

"That's a lot of money. What do you want in return?"

"Just your name, really. Once Halloran's men find out you're riding for the Slash W, they'll hightail it out of the country. No one in his right mind will work for the old man once they know your gun is siding me. Halloran will be forced to sell out and when he does, I'll give you a five thousand dollar bonus and you'll be free to go." The tone of her voice, the fire smouldering in her vibrant emerald eyes, assured Tyree he would not want to leave her. Ever.

Tyree whistled softly. "Five grand. That's a hefty sum."

"Yes." She looked up at him through the

dark fringe of her lashes, her eyes bright, her mouth forming a smile because it had been so easy.

"A hefty sum," Tyree repeated. "But I don't need the money. Thanks, anyway."

Annabelle sucked in a deep breath that caused her ample breasts to strain against the thin cotton cloth that held them bound. Her eyes glowed like green fire as she purred, "Perhaps I could offer you something else?"

"Yeah?" Tyree asked, suppressing a knowing grin. "What did you have in mind?"

Annabelle pressed herself against Tyree. "Do I have to say it?"

Tyree's mouth turned down, and his voice was cruelly mocking as he said, "You worth five grand? Most whores don't come that high."

He had expected her to get angry, but she only smiled up at him. "I'm worth much, much more, cowboy," she boasted. "But you'll never know unless you agree to work for me, starting today."

Tyree's laugh was humorless. "That right? What's to stop me from taking you here and now?"

"Nothing," Annabelle said with a small shrug of her creamy shoulders. "But a gift freely given is much more satisfying than one taken by force."

"You think so? I've always found the victory sweeter when the battle is hard fought."

Annabelle was sitting beside him, her leg

pressed against his, her hand gently kneading the muscle in his thigh. At his words, she flounced over onto her stomach, leaving him to study her smooth back and softly rounded buttocks.

Too late, Tyree realized it was a ruse. In a quick pantherish movement, Annabelle delved under the nearest bed pillow and withdrew a silver-plated derringer. With a triumphant smirk, she thrust the cocked weapon into Tyree's groin.

"No man takes me against my will," she hissed, all ice where she had once been fire. "No man! We do things my way, or not at all."

"Suits me," Tyree said easily. "Now put that gun away before I break your arm."

Annabelle swallowed a triumphant smile as she slipped the gun back into its hiding place beneath the pillow. Men. They were so pliable, so easily led. Even Tyree, for all his rough talk, was willing to bend to her will just for the promise of bedding her.

His slap came as a shock, doubly so because she had been so certain of another easy victory. The blow brought quick tears of pain to her eyes, and a string of vituperative words to her lips as she reached for the derringer again, but Tyree knew what to expect this time and his long arm slid under the pillow first. With lazy grace, he unloaded the deadly little pistol and tossed the shells on the floor.

"Next time you try that, I'll kill you," he remarked, his tone easy and calm, as if he



were commenting on something trivial, like the weather or the price of wool.

"How dare you strike me!" Annabelle shouted angrily. "Leave my house at once!"

"I'll be going all right," Tyree assured her. "But not until I've had a taste of what you've been offering ever since I walked through the door."

"You wouldn't dare!"

Tyree's insolent smile assured her that he would.

Grabbing a handful of her hair, he forced her back on the bed, his mouth closing over hers, his teeth bruising her lips. It was a brutal kiss, and Annabelle kicked and bucked beneath him, her fists pummeling his back in useless fury.

He did not release her, only caught her hands in his, rendering her helpless. He kissed her long and hard, until it was difficult for her to breathe, until she stopped struggling and lay passive beneath him.

Abruptly, she changed tactics and began to arch against him, pressing her breasts against his chest, twining her long legs around his waist, urging him to possess her fully. Her pulse began to race as Tyree's kiss became more intimate. He was a big man, so much more masculine than the Kansas City railroad man she had conned out of several thousand dollars. So much more handsome than the rotund Chicago banker who had wined her

and dined her and offered to buy her a fur coat for just an hour of her favors.

Annabelle smiled smugly as Tyree's hand slid along her breast. She would have to be careful in her handling of Logan Tyree. He was a dangerous man and not one to be trifled with. She had underestimated him, she mused, but she would not make that mistake again. No man had ever bested her. And Logan Tyree would soon learn to toe the mark, just like all the others.

Watching her, Tyree thought Annabelle looked like a spoiled kitten plotting mischief. He grinned wryly as he stood up.

Annabelle frowned. "Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving."

"Leaving?"

"You're not worth five grand," he said with a shrug. "Sorry."

Her angry screams followed him out of the house and into the dusk.





## *Chapter 12*

Clint Wesley sat in his office, a sour expression on his handsome young face. Word of Tyree's shoot-out with the four Walsh riders was the talk of the town. Tyree's reputation, which was already formidable, was growing with each retelling of the tale. Everyone in Yellow Creek was yammering for Tyree's scalp, but there wasn't one man in the whole damn town willing to pin on a deputy's badge and share the risk in bringing him in. And Clint did not have the guts to take him on alone. It was as simple as that. None of the townspeople really blamed the Marshal for his reluctance, but they rode him hard just the same. After all, he was the law. It was his job, not theirs.

Clint ran a hand over his eyes, dragged it across his jaw and down his neck. It had always been such an easy job, keeping the peace in Yellow Creek. At least until Logan Tyree rode into town. Sure, there had been some trouble between the Lazy H and the Slash W. Halloran's men had been killed, cattle stolen. John Halloran had sworn that Job Walsh was responsible for everything, but there had never been any real proof that Walsh's men were gunning the Halloran cowhands. Not any proof that would stand up in a court of law. Of course, none of that mattered now that Walsh was dead and buried. But Tyree . . . damn! The man had killed four men in Bowsher's Saloon in front of a score of witnesses. Everyone said Tyree had bushwhacked Walsh, too, but once again, there was no proof.

What a mess! Fingering his badge, Clint considered quitting and riding on. Let someone else tackle Logan Tyree. Let someone else try and bring the gunfighter in. The town wasn't paying him enough to take on a professional killer like Tyree.

With his mind made up, Wesley unpinned the badge from his vest. The star felt heavy in his hand. Staring at it, he thought of Rachel. He would never see her again if he rode out of town with his tail tucked between his legs. Thirty bucks a month wasn't worth getting killed over, but Rachel . . . that was a different story. She was every man's ideal: beauti-

ful, soft-spoken, with a promise of heaven in her sky-blue eyes and a radiant smile on her sweet red lips. Rachel. He would never be able to face her again if he backed down from doing a job that was rightly his.

Frowning thoughtfully, Clint unholstered his gun and laid it on the desk. Tyree hadn't been born with a gun in his hand. He had to learn to draw and fire just like everybody else. No doubt it had taken hours of practice. Anybody could quick-draw a Colt if he practiced hard enough.

Face grim with determination, Clint pinned his badge to his vest where it belonged. Then, with a sigh of determination, he picked up his gun and went out behind the jailhouse to begin practicing his draw . . .





## *Chapter 13*

Tyree rose with the sun. Dressing, he gathered his gear together and stowed it in his warbag. Outside, he paused briefly on the front porch of the old Jorgensen place to watch the sun climb over the distant mountains. It was a sight he never tired of, though few people who knew him would have thought him capable of appreciating anything as ordinary as a sunrise.

Settling his hat on his head, he walked down to the corral. Minutes later, he was riding toward the Lazy H. He passed several bunches of cattle, all wearing brands that wouldn't bear close inspection, and he wondered how many of the cattle wearing the Walsh brand belonged to the Lazy H. It

seemed Annabelle was as big a crook as her brother had been.

Annabelle. Tyree grinned ruefully. Once, he would have taken what she had offered without a qualm. But Rachel's sweet lovèmaking had ruined him for all other women. Annabelle was beautiful in face and form, and yet she had left him cold and unmoved. Her kisses had been empty, her promises hollow.

Lifting the stallion into an easy lope, Tyree put everything from his mind, losing himself in the smooth rocking motion of the gray, and in the pastoral beauty of the wild land, savoring the wondrous sense of freedom and well-being he always experienced when riding alone across the open prairie.

He rode for a long time, stopping once to watch a handful of Indians on the move. They were heading south to spend the coming winter in Mexico. They were a sorry sight, the warriors mounted on scrawny, slat-sided ponies, the women walking behind the men, their long cotton skirts dragging in the dust. A sorry sight, indeed. Even the dogs looked beat. And yet, for all that, Tyree felt a sudden urge to ride after them, to forget the complicated ways of the white man and go back to the blanket.

The urge to follow them was strong, but he had promised Rachel he would return to her, and his word was about the only honorable thing he had left. It would not be easy, settling down, living summer and winter under the



same roof, loving only one woman, but what the hell, Rachel wanted him, and it was for sure no one else did. He thought briefly of Annabelle, but she did not want Tyree, the man. Just his gun.

Turning north, the land changed as the flat unbroken ground gradually gave way to gently rolling hills and thick stands of timber. A tall sandstone spire loomed in the distance, pointing like a finger toward heaven. A lone eagle soared overhead, wheeling and diving in an endless search for prey.

Riding on, Tyree passed a line shack, long unused judging by the broken windows and the sagging front door.

And then he was on Halloran ground. As he rode toward the ranch, he could readily understand why Job Walsh had coveted the Lazy H, and why Annabelle was trying to get her hands on it now. There was plenty of good grass, water all year round.

The sun was high in the sky when he drew the gray to a halt beside a quiet stream that flowed in the valley between two low hills. Dismounting, he stripped the rigging from the stallion; then, placing his gun within easy reach, he shucked his clothing and stepped into the chill water. Squatting on his heels in the shallow stream, he rinsed away the dust of the trail. Later, feeling relaxed and refreshed, he stretched out under a leafy cottonwood and took a nap.

The sky was aflame with color when he

rode into the Halloran yard. He spent twenty minutes currying the gray before going up to the house. Tossing his hat on the rack inside the front door, he headed for the kitchen, expecting to find Rachel stirring up some supper.

Instead, he found John Halloran hunched over the kitchen table, staring bleakly into a cup of cold black coffee.

"What's going on?" Tyree asked, standing hipshot in the doorway. "Where's Rachel?"

Halloran did not look up. "I don't know," he said heavily. "She rode out early this morning. Her horse came back three hours ago. Candido and the men are out looking for her now—"

Tyree did not wait for any further explanations. Grabbing his hat, he ran down to the corral, whistled for the gray. He did not waste time with a saddle, merely threw a hackamore over the stud's head and vaulted onto its bare back. A sharp kick sent the mustang thundering out of the yard, hellbent for the Slash W.

Annabelle was waiting for him in the parlor, coolly sipping a glass of red wine. Two mean-looking Yaqui cowboys stood off to one side, their arms crossed over their chests. A third vaquero stood behind Annabelle's chair, a shotgun cradled in his burly arms.

"Why, Mr. Tyree," Annabelle purred as he stomped into the room. "How nice of you to drop by so soon after your last . . . visit."

"Cut the crap!" Tyree said tersely. "Where's Rachel?"

"Quite safe, for now." Annabelle gestured at the chair beside her. "Won't you sit down?"

"Where is she?" Tyree repeated through clenched teeth.

"Keeping company with a few of my men. As I said, she's quite safe. For now. Whether she stays that way depends entirely on you."

"I'm listening."

"Rachel and I had a rather interesting little talk this afternoon," Annabelle remarked in a conspiratorial tone. "As you know, I've been rather curious to know who killed my brother, and after a little, ah, persuasion, Miss Halloran was kind enough to tell me what I wanted to know."

Tyree's face remained expressionless, but he felt his muscles begin to grow tense. His left hand curled into a tight fist. "That so?"

"Yes." Annabelle leaned forward, her eyes bright. "Can you guess who she named as Job's murderer?"

"No. Who?"

"You, Mr. Tyree?"

He did not have to turn around to know that the two Yaqui cowboys had drawn their guns.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. I would like to hear it from your own mouth, if you don't mind."

"Okay, I killed him." Tyree felt the hair raise along the back of his neck as he waited for Annabelle's men to cut him down.



"Why did you kill my brother?" Annabelle's eyes bored into Tyree's, hard and cold and ruthless.

"What the hell difference does it make now?" Tyree asked impatiently. He heard one of the Yaquis take a step forward and his back grew rigid as he waited for a bullet to smash into him.

"I want to know," Annabelle said.

"I did it as a favor to Halloran for saving my life."

"Hogwash! You've never done anybody a favor in your whole life." Annabelle looked at him shrewdly. "Halloran paid you, didn't he?" she demanded. "He paid you to kill my brother!" She stamped her foot angrily when Tyree did not answer. "Tell me, Tyree, or you'll never see Rachel Halloran alive again."

"She's nothing to me," Tyree said with a shrug. But his insides were coiled tight as bedsprings. If anything happened to Rachel, Annabelle Walsh would pay, and pay dearly.

"My men will be glad to hear that," Annabelle remarked, smiling smugly. "All twelve of them."

The implication was all too clear, Tyree mused. Either he told Annabelle what she wanted to know, or Annabelle would turn her men loose on Rachel.

"You win," Tyree conceded gruffly. "Old man Halloran paid me five hundred dollars to get your brother off his back. I did it the only way I know."

Annabelle nodded as she sat back in her chair. "Yes, I thought as much."

"What now?" Tyree asked dispassionately. "A quick bullet in the back?"

"Of course not," Annabelle said, laughing softly. "I made you an offer last night. One that you rudely refused." She pulled a piece of paper from her skirt pocket. "I still want you to work for me, Tyree. And I always get what I want."

Tyree eyed the paper suspiciously. "That so?"

"Yes. This is a confession stating that you killed my brother. I would advise you to sign it."

"And if I refuse?"

"Miss Halloran will wind up in the river. Dead, of course."

"Of course," Tyree repeated dryly. "And if I sign?"

"I'll lock this up in a safe place. You'll come to work for me, and we'll forget all this unpleasantness ever happened." Rising, she placed her wineglass on a low table. Moving toward Tyree, she placed her hand on his shoulder, let it slide suggestively down his arm, secretly reveling in the taut muscles coiled beneath her fingertips. "Don't be stubborn, Tyree," she crooned. "We'll be good together. And if it will make you happy, I'll even let Halloran keep his ranch. All but the southeast section that borders on my back pasture. That's fair, isn't it?"

"It's blackmail, is what it is," Tyree muttered.

"Surely working for me would be better than seeing that poor old man wind up in jail as an accessory to murder? And infinitely better than hanging."

It was in Tyree's mind to tell Annabelle Walsh to go to hell. But John Halloran had done him a favor, and he couldn't ride out of Yellow Creek and leave the old man to face Annabelle's ruthless greed alone. And then there was Rachel. The thought of Annabelle's men, of any man, touching her made his blood run cold.

And what the hell, he mused. He was better suited to hiring out his gun to a woman like Annabelle Walsh than trying to settle down. A little voice in the back of his mind chided that he was taking the coward's way out, but he refused to listen. He had known all along he was making a mistake by promising to marry Rachel. He would never make her happy, never in a million years.

And so he said, "Okay, Annabelle, you win. I'll sign your confession. But only if you draft a new one that leaves Halloran's name out of it completely."

"All right," Annabelle said agreeably. "I don't see any reason to tell Rachel or her father about our bargain, do you?"

"No."

"Good. Then it's all settled."

"Just one more thing. If anything happens



to Rachel or her old man, I'll come after you, confession or no confession. You remember that."

"I'll remember. Nacho, bring more wine. This is an occasion for celebrating."

Rachel's tears had long since dried up, but the fear remained, tying her stomach in knots, making it difficult to swallow, to think clearly.

Hours had passed since Annabelle's men had brought her to this run-down cabin. Hours that seemed like days. She kept her eyes closed, not wanting to see the faces of the men leering at her. They had stripped her down to her chemise and petticoat, and she could feel their eyes on her breasts, barely concealed beneath her lacy chemise. Occasionally, a man ran his hand over her leg or through her hair, sometimes they made crude remarks about her anatomy.

She had never known such paralyzing fear, had never felt so helpless and alone. Somehow, the Indians at Sunset Canyon had not seemed so threatening. They had been savages and had acted as such. But these were white men, most of them, civilized men. Men she had seen in town.

She shivered, her fear making her cold. Dared she ask for a blanket? She opened her eyes and quickly closed them again. It was eerie, the way the men just sat there, staring at her.

She jumped as the cabin door swung open,

gave a small cry of joy when she saw Tyree outlined against the darkening sky. She had never been so glad to see anybody in her life.

Tyree swore softly as he stepped into the dingy cabin and closed the door behind him. Rachel was lying on a filthy mattress, her wrists and ankles tied to the rusty bed frame. A grimy red kerchief was tied over her mouth. Her left eye was swollen and discolored; her right cheek was badly bruised, as if someone had hit her, hard.

He swore again. Seeing Rachel bound and gagged stirred him in a way he did not like. Scowling blackly, he tore his gaze from Rachel's violently trembling body and glanced around the room. Annabelle had not been bluffing. There were twelve men present, and a more disreputable-looking bunch would have been hard to find. Any one of them looked capable of raping Rachel until she was unconscious, and then slitting her throat without a qualm.

Annabelle's men expressed no surprise at seeing Tyree, and he felt a quick surge of anger. She had been very sure of him, damn her.

He said the password Annabelle had given him and the Slash W riders filed out of the shack, grouching a little because Tyree had arrived and spoiled their fun.

When the last Walsh gunman was gone, Tyree cut the ropes binding Rachel's hands

and feet and removed the gag from her mouth.

Embarrassed by her scant attire, Rachel crossed her arms over her breasts. "Tyree—" It was a plea and a prayer combined, the way she whispered his name.

"You all right?" he asked.

Rachel nodded wordlessly, flushing scarlet as Tyree's eyes moved over her exposed flesh.

"Good," he said curtly. "Get dressed."

"She knows," Rachel said, reaching for her dress. "Annabelle knows you killed her brother."

"It's all right."

"I had to tell her," Rachel said in a small voice. Her brilliant blue eyes pleaded for Tyree's understanding and forgiveness. "She said she would let her men amuse themselves with me if I didn't tell her what she wanted to know. At first, I thought she was just trying to scare me. But then she brought me out here." Rachel's words came faster and faster as she relived the horror of the past few hours. "Her men passed me back and forth, kissing me, making remarks about . . . about . . . Oh, Tyree, it was awful! And then, when I still wouldn't tell her anything, she told one of the men to tie me to the bed. When he started to take off his pants, I knew she wasn't bluffing. Tyree, she said she would let all twelve of her men have me, and I believed her. I had to tell her. I was so afraid!"



"It's all right, Rachel," Tyree assured her. With a sigh, he took her in his arms and held her while she cried, thinking all the while that a good hiding with a bullwhip would benefit Annabelle Walsh immensely, though it would be a sin to permanently mar that exquisitely sculpted alabaster body.

"Come on," Tyree coaxed when Rachel's tears subsided. "We'd better get you home. Your old man is worried sick."

Something in his tone made Rachel's heart go cold. "You're not coming with me, are you, Tyree?"

"No."

"Why not? What's happened to change your mind?"

"Annabelle made me a better offer," Tyree said flatly. He winced at the hurt rising in Rachel's eyes. Damn! He had never meant to hurt her, never meant to get so deeply involved. He knew now it had been a mistake to promise to marry her. He was too old to hang up his gun, too set in his ways to start a new life. "Let's go."

Rachel followed Tyree meekly out of the shack, climbed stiffly into the saddle of the horse he had brought for her to ride. She stared straight ahead as they made their way through the dark night, her mind in turmoil. Tyree, too, was staring into the darkness and Rachel felt her heart melt with longing as she studied his swarthy profile. *What happened, she wanted to cry. Why have you changed your*

*mind?* But her pride kept her tongue mute and the silence between them grew thick and impenetrable.

Tyree reined the gray to a halt under the high double arch that marked the beginning of the Halloran ranch yard. "Tell your old man the Walsh riders won't be bothering him any more."

Rachel looked at Tyree askance, one delicate brow rising like a butterfly in flight.

"And tell him I'll be over one day soon to get his signature on a bill of sale deeding your southeast section to Annabelle."

"So that's the way it is," Rachel said dully. "You're working for her now."

"Yeah."

It was too much for Rachel to absorb: the kidnapping, the awful hours in the shack with Annabelle's men, and now Tyree talking to her in a cold, impersonal tone, as if she were a stranger.

With a curt nod, Rachel slammed her heels into her mount's flanks and galloped down the tree-lined road toward home and the solid comfort of her father's arms.





## *Chapter 14*

*Life* was easy on the Walsh spread. Two dozen Mexican vaqueros handled all the ranch work, while a handful of house servants waited on Annabelle and her hired guns.

As was his wont, Tyree kept to himself, ignoring the other gunmen whenever possible. But Annabelle could not be ignored. She was as bold and beautiful as a crimson flower in a patch of dry weeds.

She appointed Tyree as her personal body-guard and insisted he sleep in the main house in the bedroom that adjoined her own. She dressed always in rich vibrant colors that accentuated her flawless complexion and complimented her luxurious red hair and emerald eyes. She rarely wore dresses, prefer-

ring tight pants and low-cut silk blouses that outlined the generous curve of her hips and the proud thrust of her breasts. Tyree often thought she was wasting her time on a ranch when her true talents could be put to better use in the rooms above Bowsher's Saloon.

Annabelle ruled the Slash W like a queen, granting favors when she was pleased, meting out quick and severe punishment when she was offended. And she was easily offended. The servants were quick to obey her slightest wish, wary of arousing her fiery temper.

She was riding high, Tyree thought sardonically. Mistress of all she surveyed and loving every minute of it. She certainly enjoyed bossing him around, there was no doubt about that. And Tyree let her get away with it because it amused him, for the moment, to let Annabelle think she held the upper hand.

She made no secret of the fact that she found Tyree tremendously desirable. Time and again she came to his bedroom, her voluptuous form barely concealed in some flimsy gown that accentuated every curve. Often, she sat on the edge of his bed, her hand boldly stroking his thigh.

Some nights, when he was lying alone in the dark and Annabelle came to him, he was tempted. Sorely tempted. Annabelle was beautiful, and she was more than willing to ease the ache in his loins, but he could not bring himself to make love to Annabelle

Walsh, not with the memory of Rachel's sweetness so fresh in his mind.

Rachel. He missed her more than he cared to admit. She was always in his thoughts. He missed seeing her every day, missed the sound of her voice, the warmth of her smile.

As the days passed, it grew harder and harder to put Annabelle off. She was a comely wench when she was getting her own way, all seductive smiles and tempting softness. So filled with pride and arrogance she never realized Tyree was humoring her because it suited him at the moment. Tyree had never thought of himself as a coward, but the truth was, the idea of marrying Rachel scared him to death. It had seemed easier to give in to Annabelle's demands, to let Rachel believe he found Annabelle more enticing, than to admit he had cold feet. For now, it amused him to placate Annabelle, to let her think he was cowed by her threat to turn him in for killing her brother. Hell, he was already wanted for murder in Kansas and Texas, and they could only hang him once. For now, he would play Annabelle's game and when he tired of her tricks, he would move on.

Annabelle wielded all her charms the night Joaquin Montoya came to call. Montoya was an outlaw who traded in human flesh, kidnapping men, women, and children and selling them into slavery south of the border. The women were sold to brothels, the men and



children were sold to the mines. No one was safe from Montoya's grasping hand, and he sold those of his own blood as quickly as gringos.

Annabelle introduced Tyree to Montoya, and the two men shook hands. They disliked each other immediately.

Somehow, Tyree was not surprised to find that Annabelle and Montoya were well-acquainted. They talked amiably all through dinner about people and places they had known in the past. Annabelle smiled at Montoya often, frequently finding an excuse to touch his arm, his shoulder, his hand. Montoya paid her several compliments, his dark eyes praising her beauty.

Tyree remained silent through most of the meal, amused by the whole thing. He was not surprised, or jealous, when Montoya followed Annabelle to bed. Only relieved that she would not be pestering him.

Montoya left early the following morning, and Tyree was glad to see him go.

As the days passed, the other gunslicks in Annabelle's employ became increasingly jealous of Tyree's relationship with the boss, but that was their problem, not his, and Tyree went his own way, unperturbed by their envious glances and snide remarks. If they wanted to believe he was sleeping with Annabelle, it was no skin off his ass.

During those first few weeks in Annabelle's employ, the hardest thing Tyree had to do was

face Rachel. He had hurt her deeply, and he was sorry. But far better to cause her a little heartache now than marry her and subject her to a lifetime of regret.

Rachel was sitting on the front porch darning a pair of her old man's socks the morning Tyree rode over to get Halloran's signature on a Bill of Sale. She looked as fresh as a spring flower, what with her hair shining like liquid gold and her skin glowing soft and smooth. Looking at her, he wondered how he had ever thought Annabelle Walsh remotely attractive.

Tyree reined the gray to a halt near the porch steps. "Mornin', Rachel," he said quietly. "Is your old man home?"

"He's inside," Rachel answered coldly. She rose to her feet, her fingers digging into her palms. Why did her heart lurch with such longing at the mere sight of him? She yearned to run to him, to throw her arms around his neck and pour out her heart, to beg him to love her as she loved him. But pride stilled her tongue and stiffened her spine. "I'll get him."

She did not invite Tyree into the house, and he did not dismount.

John Halloran came out of the house alone. Pen in hand, he took the deed from Tyree, quickly signed his name to the paper that gave Annabelle Walsh title to a section of land long coveted by the Slash W.

"How long before she takes the rest of the place?" Halloran asked bitterly.

"She won't."

Halloran laughed hollowly as he thrust the deed at Tyree. "No? Who's gonna stop her? You?"

"If I have to," Tyree replied calmly. "So long, Halloran."

From inside the house, Rachel watched Tyree ride out of the yard. For a moment, she tried to fight back the tears welling in her eyes. Then, with a sob, she sank down in a chair and let the tears flow. It felt good to cry, good to release the hurt she had been carrying within her heart.

How foolish she had been to think Tyree would change; to think he would hang up his gun and become a rancher. She had been kidding herself all along. Maybe he was too old to change. Maybe he had never cared for her at all. The thought made the tears come faster, blurring her vision, making her eyes red and swollen, her throat sore.

She cried until she was empty inside, but the heartache remained and she knew she would love Logan Tyree as long as she lived.

Tyree had been in Annabelle's employ about a month when she decided it was time he earned his keep.

"There's a squatter out near Coyote Butte," she remarked one night after dinner. "Get rid of him for me, will you, Tyree?"

It was not a request, Tyree mused, but a command wrapped in velvet.

He left the Slash W early the following



morning. It was a beautiful day, blessed by a brilliant blue sky that reminded him of the color of Rachel's eyes, and a soft summer breeze that held the heat at bay.

The squatter had chosen a wooded section of land watered by a narrow, gurgling stream. It was a pretty spot, perfect for a homestead. A good place to put down roots, raise kids and crops and cattle.

The man was sawing the branches off a newly fallen tree when Tyree rode up and stepped easily from the saddle.

"Folks usually wait to be asked to step down back where I come from," the squatter remarked, shading his eyes so he could see Tyree's face.

"That so? Around here, folks don't take up residence on somebody else's land without permission."

"This is free range," the squatter protested belligerently. "I checked it out before I came."

"You made a mistake," Tyree said flatly. "Pack your gear and move on."

"I got no place else to go," the man argued. "I'll have my floor in by tomorrow. I plan to have the walls up before the month is out."

"You'd best change your plans," Tyree warned, "or I'll change them for you."

The squatter was a young man, perhaps twenty-five years old. He was square-built, as solid as oak. He had dark brown hair and blue eyes that were looking scared.

"You've got five minutes to pack up and be on your way," Tyree said curtly.

"And if I refuse?"

Tyree jerked a thumb at the man's gunbelt, lying atop a flat rock some six feet away. "You can try your luck with that."

"I'm no gunfighter," the man protested, backing away from Tyree.

Tyree's smile was deadly. "I am."

"You'd shoot me down, in cold blood?" the young man asked incredulously.

"No. You'll have your chance. Buckle on that gunbelt."

"No."

"Then ride on."

The squatter stared at Tyree, his emotions as transparent as the water gurgling in the nearby stream. He did not want to leave. He had sold everything he owned to make the move West. He did not want to draw against a professional gunman, and he did not want to run.

"It's your move," Tyree drawled softly.

"Damn!" The man whispered the oath as he sidled toward his gunbelt. His eyes never left Tyree's face. Almost in slow motion, he picked up his gunbelt. Then, flinging himself to the ground, he jerked the .44 out of the holster and pulled the trigger.

The slug went wide, missing Tyree by a good two feet. Without conscious thought, Tyree drew his gun and sighted down the barrel.

The squatter stared up at him, helpless as a rabbit in a trap, too scared to pull the trigger a second time.

Tyree's finger was steady on the trigger and taking up the slack when Rachel's voice sounded in the back of his mind: "A gun may not know right from wrong," her voice accused, "but a man does."

Abruptly, Tyree holstered the Colt and rode on, leaving the squatter to stare after him in open-mouthed astonishment.

Two weeks later, Annabelle sent Tyree out again, commanding him to finish the job this time. It was dusk when he left the hacienda, a rifle across his saddle, his Colt riding heavy on his hip.

The squatters he sought were huddled around a cheery campfire when he arrived. There were four kids under twelve, a man and a woman. The family's lively chatter came to an abrupt halt as Tyree rode into the firelight. The woman was plump in a pleasing sort of way, with a mass of russet-colored hair, brown eyes, and rough workworn hands. Her face paled visibly when she saw the rifle nestled in Tyree's capable hands.

Her husband rose slowly to his feet, his arms dangling harmlessly at his sides. He was short and thin, with sandy brown hair, gray eyes, and a full beard. He wore a knife sheathed on his belt. An old Colt's Dragoon was shoved into the waistband of his trousers.



"Hi, mister," piped one of the kids, a girl about five years old. "That sure is a pretty horse."

"Tessie, hush!" her mother scolded.

"They told me in town that you'd show up," the man said dispiritedly. "I was hoping they'd be wrong."

"You're not wanted here," Tyree said.

"We're staying."

"No."

Slowly, the man shook his head. "I don't hold with killing," he said sadly. "But you do what you have to do."

"Suit yourself," Tyree murmured. He jacked a round into the breech of the Winchester, swung the barrel in the direction of the squatter's heart.

And couldn't pull the trigger.

With a heavy sigh, he lowered the rifle. "You're on Slash W range," he said tersely. "Don't be here tomorrow."

Wheeling the gray around, he galloped into the darkness without giving the man a chance to reply.

He was in a foul mood when he returned to the Slash W ranch house. Annabelle was waiting for him in the parlor, a question in her green eyes.

"It's done," Tyree said curtly.

"They're dead?"

"No."

The green eyes narrowed ominously. "Why didn't you kill them?"

"Because there was no need. The man doesn't have the guts to stay and make a fight of it. They'll be gone by tomorrow."

"What's the matter, Tyree?" Annabelle taunted. "Lost your nerve?"

Lazily, Tyree reached out and grabbed her arm in a grip of iron. "Is that what you think?" he challenged. He gave her arm a cruel twist, but Annabelle only laughed up at him, delighting in his easy strength.

But later, alone, her words came back to haunt him. Had he lost his nerve? Once, he would have gunned the squatter without a second thought. But that was before Rachel, he mused. Somehow, her values, her ideals of right and wrong had become his.

The following Saturday morning Tyree rode into town. He spent the early hours of the day loafing on the porch of the Palace Hotel, watching the townspeople go about their business, amused by the surreptitious glances they slanted in his direction. Everyone knew he was working for the Slash W and there was a lot of lively speculation about his unexpected change of employers.

Clint Wesley rode by the hotel on his way out of town shortly after noon, and Tyree felt a mild sense of relief. Sooner or later, Wesley's devotion to duty would overcome his good sense and when that day came, Tyree would have to kill him. He was glad it would not be today.

Moments later, Tyree saw Rachel. She was alone, standing on the boardwalk in front of the doctor's office. She looked good enough to eat, all dolled up in a pale yellow muslin day dress, and a white straw hat bedecked with long yellow streamers. It had been over two months since the night he seduced her at the Jorgensen place, and his eyes lingered hungrily on her trim form. He frowned thoughtfully as he glanced from Rachel's face to the doctor's office. With a grunt, he gained his feet and moved down the street.

Rachel frowned when she saw Tyree striding purposefully toward her. Turning on her heel, she headed in the opposite direction, but she wasn't fast enough to elude Tyree. His hand closed firmly over her arm, halting her flight.

"Take your hand off me!" Rachel demanded, her voice pitched low so as not to attract any undue attention.

"Afternoon, Miss Halloran," Tyree said with exaggerated politeness. "Sorry I'm late for our appointment."

"Appointment?" Rachel exclaimed angrily. "What are you talking about?"

"The one we have now," Tyree said. "Come on, take a walk with me."

"No."

"You're coming with me whether you like it or not," Tyree growled. "I'll carry you if I have to."

Rachel scowled irritably. He was just inso-



lent enough to do such a scandalous thing.

"Oh, very well," she relented. "But take your hand off my arm."

"So you can run away? Not a chance."

"I won't run," Rachel promised sullenly. "Now unhand me."

Reluctantly, Tyree released his grip on Rachel's arm. Side by side, they walked down the street toward the end of town.

Rachel stared straight ahead, acutely conscious of the man walking beside her. Her skin was still warm and tingled faintly where his hand had grasped her arm. As they strolled silently down the street, Tyree's hand brushed hers and she pulled away, not wanting him to touch her, even though all her senses screamed for the pressure of his body next to her own. Night after night she had lain wide awake, yearning for his touch, hating him because he had dumped her for Annabelle Walsh. The thought of Tyree kissing Annabelle made her sick at heart. Oh, it wasn't fair, Rachel wailed in silent rage. His face haunted her dreams. Her mouth hungered for the taste of his kisses. No matter how hard she tried to convince herself that she hated and despised Logan Tyree, her body continued to yearn for his touch. She missed the sound of his laughter, his sardonic smile, the way his eyes lingered on her face as soft as a caress.

They were at the outskirts of town before Tyree broke the silence between them. "How

are things at the ranch?" he asked gruffly.  
"Everything okay?"

"Yes." Rachel's eyes were cold when she looked at him.

"Your old man all right?"

"Yes."

"Are the Walsh riders giving you any more trouble?"

"No."

Tyree muttered a mild oath, annoyed by her curt monosyllabic replies. He scowled blackly, his narrowed eyes moving slowly over her full breasts and tiny waist.

"How about you?" he rasped. "Are you fine, too?"

For a moment, Rachel frowned at him. And then her cheeks flamed with embarrassment as she perceived the real meaning of his concern for her health.

"I'm not pregnant, if that's what you're thinking," she snapped. "And if I were, I'd kill myself before I gave birth to a child sired by a varmint like you!"

Anger flared deep in Tyree's yellow eyes, shining bright as summer lightning before it died away. A cynical smile curved his mouthline. "Death to dishonor," he drawled lazily.

"Honor!" Rachel's laugh was cold. "What would you know about honor, you . . . you—" She stamped her foot in frustration as words failed her.

"Murderer?" Tyree supplied the word, his

tone hard as flint. "Despoiler of fair damsels?"

"Yes," Rachel lashed out scathingly. "You're all those things and worse." She lifted her head, her clear blue eyes burning into his. "A man was found dead near Coyote Butte last month. You killed him, didn't you?"

"If I said no, would you believe me?"

"If you didn't kill him, who did?"

"Yarnell."

"Why?"

"The man was on Slash W land," Tyree answered tersely. "Annabelle wanted him off."

"That's open range and you know it," Rachel retorted.

"The Slash W has been grazing cattle there for years. Annabelle considers it a part of the ranch."

"And Annabelle always gets what she wants, doesn't she?" The words "including you" hung unspoken in the air between them. "Tell me, Tyree, how much did Annabelle pay you to gun that man down in cold blood?"

"I didn't kill him."

"I don't believe you. Everyone knows that's why Annabelle hired you. Did you give that man the same chance you gave Job Walsh?"

"Dammit, Rachel, back off!"

"What's the matter? Don't tell me you've developed a conscience at this late date?"

That was the trouble, Tyree thought bitterly. He *had* developed a conscience.

He glared at Rachel, confused by the anger



he felt. His hands were balled into tight fists at his sides, and a muscle worked in his jaw. For a moment, Rachel feared she had pushed him too far and that he might strike her. Instead, he turned on his heel and strode away, leaving her standing in the hot sun feeling alone and strangely sad.

Tyree was in a foul mood the rest of the day. Maybe a leopard couldn't change his spots. Maybe it was too late to try. He had never thought of himself as a murderer before, not really. Sure, he'd gunned down more than a dozen men, but never without a call. Never in cold blood. Damn her! Who was she to judge him? If it hadn't been for his gun, her old man would be dead by now, and Job Walsh would be running his cattle on the Lazy H.

Annabelle looked at Tyree with a question in her eyes more than once as the day wore on, but he remained stubbornly silent, refusing to be drawn into any conversation, answering her questions in as few words as possible. He drank several glasses of wine with dinner and later, sitting alone on the veranda, he emptied a bottle of tequila.

Wisely, Annabelle left Tyree alone. There was little about men she feared, but the look in Tyree's eye carried a warning she was loath to challenge.

It was late when Annabelle went to bed. Lying there alone, she stared out the window at the stars. For weeks, she had been trying to seduce Tyree, but to no avail. No matter how

she teased, no matter how brazenly she coaxed, he never touched her. No other man had ever been able to resist her charms. No other man had ever filled her with such desire.

Unable to sleep, she drew on a thin cotton wrapper and went outside.

Tyree was there, standing in the yard, his profile dark and unfathomable. He was shirtless and the sight of his lean bronze torso stirred Annabelle as never before, making her blood sing with desire.

Tyree turned at the sound of her footsteps. It took but one look at Annabelle's face to know what she wanted and he expelled a deep shuddering sigh as he took her in his arms and kissed her. Why not make love to Annabelle? She wanted him. She didn't care how many men he had killed. She didn't care about a damn thing.

And that was what was wrong with her.

With a vile oath, he pushed her away. He did not want Annabelle Walsh. He wanted a girl with flaxen hair and eyes as blue as a summer sky. He wanted Rachel, blushing and modest in his arms.

"Tyree?"

He shook his head. "Forget it," he muttered, and stalked out of the yard, leaving Annabelle to stare after him, a puzzled expression on her lovely face.





## *Chapter 15*

Autumn came in a colorful panorama of changing leaves, of warm, sun-kissed days and crisp, cool nights. And now, at last, there was peace between the Slash W and the Lazy H.

John Halloran hired three new cowhands. They hailed from Montana and they were young and strong and eager to work. Halloran was pleased with their enthusiasm and he began making plans for a cattle drive the following spring.

In late October, he began courting Claire Whiting, the seamstress in Yellow Creek, and he went around the house whistling cheerfully, his steps lighter than they had been in years. Claire made him feel young, carefree, and life was suddenly good again.

Rachel was happy to see her father in such high spirits, but she could not shake the gloomy feelings that permeated her days and nights. In an effort to dispel the lassitude that gripped her, she threw herself into a fit of housecleaning, dusting furniture and waxing floors as if her very life depended on shiny tabletops and slick parquet. Windows sparkled, wood surfaces gleamed. Curtains and bedspreads and tablecloths were washed and ironed until they looked like new. Cupboards and closets were duly put in order, rugs were aired, pillows were fluffed. A fresh coat of paint covered the walls in the kitchen.

Rachel worked unceasingly as if, by keeping herself constantly busy, she could keep all thought of Logan Tyree at bay; hoping, perhaps, that she could sweep Tyree's memory from her heart as easily as she swept the dust from the floors.

Why, of all men, did she have to fall in love with a man like Tyree? And now that he was out of her life, why couldn't she forget him?

When the house was so clean there was nothing left to do, she turned her attention to the bunkhouse, putting up curtains, waxing the plank floor, airing the mattresses, refurbishing the beds. John Halloran grinned and shook his head helplessly when the men began to complain that Rachel was turning their world upside down.

"If this keeps up, she's gonna have us in ruffled shirts and patent-leather boots,"

Candido grumbled. "Hell, this is a bunk-house, not the White House!"

When Rachel ran out of chores to keep her busy at the ranch, she began to spend time in town with her friend, Carol Ann. Together, they shopped for material and patterns and began sewing new dresses for church. Carol Ann was like a breath of fresh air, her idle gossip about the townspeople humorous and harmless. Betty Miller was pregnant with number six. Lydia Foreman was engaged. One of the blacksmith's sons had run away with a saloon girl, shaming his family and friends.

Spending so much time in town, Rachel could not help seeing Clint Wesley. His attention was like a healing balm to her aching heart. Clint was everything Tyree was not, everything a woman could want in a man. He was kind, polite, attentive, eager to please her. He brought her flowers and candy, took her for long walks, escorted her to church and to parties. He was tolerant of her quicksilver mood changes. He complimented her beauty, admired her new dress, was never crude or demanding or unkind. If only she could love him, Rachel lamented. If only his shy kisses had the power to make her heart beat with excitement the way Tyree's did. Clint was so unfailingly sweet, why couldn't she love him as he deserved? Why did her heart continue to yearn for a scoundrel like Logan Tyree?

It was late one blustery afternoon when Rachel drove into town, bent on a visit to Lulu



Mae's Millinery Shoppe, her heart set on a darling bonnet she had seen in the window the day before.

Stepping from the buggy, she was halfway across the street when she saw Annabelle Walsh walking down the boardwalk, one gloved hand laid possessively over Tyree's arm.

A sharp pain tore through Rachel's heart when Tyree looked down into Annabelle's face, laughing softly at something Annabelle had said. Why did Tyree have to be in town today, of all days? And why did he have to look so devilishly handsome? As usual, he was dressed all in black except for a red silk scarf that was loosely knotted at his throat. Rachel tried not to notice how the black silk shirt clung to his broad shoulders, or the way the tight whipcord britches outlined his long muscular legs. He wore expensive black kid boots and a black stetson hat, and she wondered, peevishly, if Annabelle had paid for his clothing.

Quivering with jealousy, Rachel tried not to stare at Annabelle Walsh. She had to admit, if grudgingly, that the woman was beautiful. Her hair was a glorious shade of red, her eyes as green as new grass, her smooth skin flawless. Her figure, clad in a gaudy blue and yellow stripped dress, could not be faulted.

Lifting her chin and squaring her shoulders, Rachel walked past the couple, her eyes

riveted on the rectangular red and white sign that hung over the doorway to Lulu Mae's salon.

Annabelle's hand tightened on Tyree's arm as Rachel Halloran glided swiftly past, her skirts held to one side, as if she were too good to associate with anyone from the Slash W.

"Little snit," Annabelle thought sourly. What had Tyree ever seen in John Halloran's old maid daughter? Rachel's face was as cold as stone. Little wonder she was still unmarried. Bedding her would probably be as exciting as bedding a dead fish.

Tyree's mouth thinned in an angry line as Rachel hurried past him without so much as a glance. For a brief moment, he was tempted to reach out and grab her arm, to pull her to him and kiss the blank expression from her face. But he could not do that. He had lost all right to Rachel when he consented to work for the Slash W. Mouthing an obscenity, he tore his gaze from Rachel's back and pretended to be interested in what Annabelle was saying.

Inside Lulu Mae's Millinery Shoppe, Rachel leaned against the door frame, fighting the urge to cry. Damn him, damn him, damn him! Why did seeing Tyree with Annabelle have to hurt so much? Foolishly, she felt betrayed, almost as if she had seen her husband with another woman. She was being ridiculous, and she knew it. Tyree was nothing to her.

Nothing at all. She had no claim on him. And yet, they had once been as close as a man and woman could be. Once, he had bared his soul to her. Then, apparently without even a smidgen of regret, he had turned to another woman.

With a sigh, Rachel closed her eyes, and for a moment a horrible picture danced across her mind, a vivid image of Tyree bending over Annabelle, caressing her long red hair, whispering tender words of love in her ear. . . .

The image was too awful, and she opened her eyes to find Lulu Mae Harding staring at her curiously.

"Aren't you feeling well, Miss Halloran?" the pudgy shopkeeper inquired solicitously. "You look . . . upset."

"I'm fine," Rachel said, forcing a wan smile. "I just felt a little faint for a moment."

"Too much sun, perhaps?" Lulu Mae murmured sympathetically.

"Yes, I suppose so," Rachel agreed quickly. "Could I see the hat in the window? The blue one?"

Distracted by the prospect of a sale, Lulu Mae hurried to the display in the front window and carefully removed the hat Rachel had mentioned.

"This is perfect for you," Lulu Mae gushed. She placed the bonnet on Rachel's head, tied the wide blue ribbon under Rachel's chin. "My dear, this hat was made for you. Why, it makes your eyes glow!"



"I'll take it," Rachel said. "Put it on my account, will you?"

Without waiting for Lulu Mae's reply, Rachel hurried out of the shop. She had to get away, to be alone with her thoughts.

Rachel wore the blue hat to church the following Sunday, graciously accepted Clint's compliment on how becoming it was. She got little out of the meeting, however, for engraved in her mind was the picture of Tyree walking beside Annabelle. His face, lean and brown and maddeningly attractive, seemed to mock her heartache. She had been right about him all along, she thought morosely. He was no good, nothing but a drifter, a man completely without morals or scruples. Once, she had been certain there was some good hidden beneath his gruff exterior. She had convinced herself of that the day he rescued Amy from harm's way. She had even convinced herself that his words and kisses were sincere, that he had truly cared for her. Now she knew she had only been kidding herself. The nights they had spent in each other's arms, those nights she cherished even now, had meant nothing to him. Nothing at all. Even his promise to marry her had proved to be nothing but a lie.

"Annabelle made me a better offer," he had said, and had ridden out of her life without a backward glance.

Clint took her for a buggy ride after church.

They stopped for a while beside a lazy stream, content to sit in the shade while the horse munched on the sparse yellow grass.

"Dinner tonight?" Clint asked.

"Of course," Rachel replied. "You know how my father enjoys your company."

"And you?" Clint asked in a low voice. "Do you still enjoy my company?"

"Of course," Rachel said quickly. "Did you really arrest Mr. Pedersen for beating his wife last night? Carol Ann said he spent the night in jail."

Distracted, Clint launched into the story of Pedersen's arrest.

Returning home later that afternoon, Rachel removed the becoming blue bonnet. Placing it carefully in a hat box, she placed it on a shelf in her closet, knowing she would never wear it again. Knowing that every time she saw that hat, she would remember Tyree walking with Annabelle.

## *Chapter 16*

Winter settled over the land. The rain, long overdue, came with a vengeance, flooding the gullies and arroyos, filling the natural granite tanks in the mountains to overflowing. The roads were treacherous, and people left their homes only when absolutely necessary. The Slash W lost a hundred head of cattle in the season's first big snowstorm.

For the time being, the fighting between the Slash W and the squatters was over. The settlers migrating westward would not be a problem again until after spring, and Tyree looked forward to a quiet, peaceful winter. He spent most of his time sprawled on the couch in the parlor, staring into the fire that burned night and day in the big stone fireplace, his thoughts obviously far away.



Annabelle fretted over Tyree's brooding silence, but he turned a deaf ear to her tantrums and tirades. He ignored her sultry looks, shrugged off her eager caresses. .

But Annabelle was a hot-blooded woman, one who could not go long without a man. And when Tyree continued to shun her favors, she salved her humiliation by taking a young gunman known as Morgan Yarnell under her wing. But even that failed to provoke a response from Tyree. And after awhile, Annabelle stopped trying to make Tyree jealous. Whatever was bothering him would pass. And until then, there was always Yarnell.

Tyree was faintly amused by Annabelle's behavior, but he had other things on his mind and when being cooped up in the house got to be more than he could stand, he saddled the gray and rode out across the vast Slash W range. Riding became a daily ritual, but no matter in which direction he started out, he invariably wound up on the outskirts of the Lazy H. He went there hoping to catch a glimpse of Rachel, though he would not admit such a thing even to himself. Sometimes he caught sight of her in the window of the Halloran house as she stared out at the blanket of snow that covered the land, but she never left the protection of the house, and he never rode into the yard.

Christmas Eve came, and the Slash W ranch house glittered with shiny decorations and candles. Annabelle bought lavish gifts for everyone in her employ: hired hands, house-

hold servants, the boy who gathered the eggs, no one was left out. Her gift to Tyree was a new Winchester rifle. It was a handsome weapon, beautifully wrought, with his name intricately worked into the smooth rosewood stock.

Tyree gave Annabelle a delicate ruby tear-drop on a fine gold chain.

The new year came amid a raging storm that dropped three feet of snow in two days. The cowhands worked doubly hard now, loading hay onto a great flatbed wagon and hauling it out to the range to feed the hungry cattle that bawled for food. Tyree smiled ruefully as he watched the wagon plough through the drifts of snow. Buffalo and horses would paw through the snow to search for food, but not a cow.

And still the elements raged. Snow had to be shoveled from the roof of the house, pathways had to be shoveled between the buildings. Ice had to be removed from the water troughs. Cattle died, and their carcasses lay like fallen statues in the deep snow. The river froze solid. The trees stood naked and forlorn in the howling wind, their branches sagging beneath a blanket of white.

Tyree grew increasingly restless. He paced the parlor floor until Annabelle feared he would wear a rut in the carpet. He grew quick-tempered and even more sullen until the servants refused to be in the same room with him, and even the other gunmen began to give him a wide berth.

The first day there was a break in the weather, Tyree threw a saddle on the gray and rode out across the stark white wilderness. Everyone on the Slash W was glad to see him go.

Tyree drew in a deep breath as he left the Walsh hacienda behind. Nothing moved on the face of the land save for the gray stud plodding laboriously through the deep drifts.

Tyree had gone a good ten miles when black clouds scudded across the sky like angry waves, completely blotting out the sun. Thunder echoed in the distance as fat drops of rain began to fall. The stallion tossed its head and rolled its eyes as a jagged streak of yellow lightning slashed the lowering skies.

"Easy, boy," Tyree murmured, patting the stallion's neck.

The rain came in earnest then, soaking Tyree and his mount in a matter of seconds. Reining the gray to a halt, Tyree checked his bearings. He was about halfway between the Slash W and the Lazy H, and for a moment he remained undecided. Then, clucking to the stud, he urged the animal toward the Halloran spread, feeling good for the first time in weeks.

John Halloran's eyes widened when he opened the door and saw Logan Tyree standing on the porch, hat in hand.

"Something wrong?" the old man asked.

"No. Mind if I come in?"

"I guess not," Halloran said warily. "You



look like you could use a drink, and a few minutes before the fire."

"Obliged," Tyree replied. He shook the water from his hat before stepping into the hallway.

"What brings you out on a day like this?" Halloran inquired, leading the way into the parlor. He poured two drinks, handed one to Tyree. "Sit," he invited. "Make yourself at home."

Taking a place on the sofa, Tyree stretched his long legs out in front of him. The whiskey was prime, and the fire and the smooth liquor quickly chased the chill from his bones.

The parlor was a comfortable room, done in rich mahogany and native stone. A gun rack held several Henry repeaters and an old Sharps buffalo gun. There was a bearskin rug on the floor, a rack of antlers over the mantle. It was definitely a man's room, and Tyree wondered how long Ellen Halloran had been dead. The only evidence he could find to indicate a woman's touch was a vase of dried desert flowers on one of the tables.

"I hear Annabelle lost some stock," Halloran remarked after a lengthy silence.

"Yeah, a couple hundred head or so. How about you?"

Halloran made a vague gesture of defeat. "All dead. Somebody burned my winter hay awhile back. The cows that didn't freeze to death died hungry." He laughed bitterly. "I guess we're broke for sure."

The old man stared vacantly into the fireplace. "I had to let Candido and the others go. I guess, come spring, Annabelle will run me out." There was a thinly veiled look of accusation in Halloran's eyes when he glanced at his guest.

"You think I'll come gunning for you?" Tyree asked flatly.

"I don't know," Halloran answered honestly. "I'd like to think not."

"But . . ."

Halloran raised his shoulders, then let them drop. "I keep remembering Job Walsh. I paid you five hundred dollars and you gunned him down without a second thought. And now . . ."

"And now I'm working for Annabelle," Tyree muttered with a sigh. "And she can afford to pay more than five hundred dollars."

"Yeah."

"Stop worrying, Halloran. If she wants this place, come spring, she'll buy you out."

"Annabelle seems to have a great deal of money," Rachel said from the doorway. "And yet, I hear she's paying you more than just cash for your services." There was contempt in her tone and in her eyes as she stepped into the room.

A muscle worked in Tyree's jaw. "Where'd you hear that?"

"It's all over town. Are you going to deny it?"

"Would you believe me if I did?"

"No, I wouldn't."

Tyree scowled at her as she took a seat in one of the big brown leather chairs that flanked the fireplace, trying to ignore the way the blue wool dress she was wearing outlined her figure, and the way the flames danced in her hair, highlighting the thick golden mass with streaks of red. Looking at her stirred a familiar ache in his loins.

"Just what are you doing here, Mr. Tyree?" Rachel asked bluntly.

"I came by to see how you and your old man were making out," Tyree replied curtly, angered by her rude tone of voice, and by the disdain shining in her eyes.

"Why?"

"Rachel!"

"Oh, Pa, how can you sit here and talk to him like he's a long lost friend? You know he's only here because Annabelle sent him to spy on us."

"Dammit, that's not true!" Tyree hurled the words at Rachel. "*I* came because . . ." The sentence died unfinished. "I'd better be going."

"Don't be a fool," Halloran chided gruffly. "You can't ride in this weather. You'll freeze before you get out of the yard."

"Good riddance," Rachel muttered under her breath, then flushed guiltily when she realized Tyree had heard her.



"I don't think I'm welcome here," Tyree said dryly. "But thanks for the drink and the fire."

"I'm still the boss in this house," Halloran declared, silencing Rachel with a sharp glance. "And I won't have you riding out in this storm. Supper's about ready. And there's enough for one more. Isn't there, daughter?"

"Yes, Pa," Rachel answered sullenly.

"Good. It's settled then. You'll stay the night, Tyree. And tomorrow, too, if the weather doesn't clear."

When dinner was over they gathered in the parlor again, around the fireplace. Outside, the wind howled and the elements raged, but inside it was warm and comfortable, save for the strained atmosphere between Rachel and Tyree.

John Halloran rambled on about crops and cattle and the advantages of barn feeding as opposed to pasture feeding until he ran out of small talk. Lighting his pipe, he stared at the flames, letting his thoughts wander back to the nights when Ellen had sat beside him, her small hand in his, her face warm with love as they dreamed and planned for the future. He remembered how beautiful she had been when she sat with Tommy at her breast, her face glowing like the Virgin Mary's.

Feeling a sudden tightness in his throat, Halloran rose abruptly to his feet and left the room.

"I'll be saying goodnight, too," Rachel said,

after her father left the parlor. "You can sleep in here, on the sofa, if you like. It'll be warmer than the spare bedroom."

"What's the matter, Rachel?" Tyree challenged. "Afraid to be alone with me?"

Rachel's chin went up defiantly. "Afraid? Why should I be afraid?"

"I don't know," Tyree responded softly. "You tell me."

He was standing in front of her, so close she could smell the heady male scent of him. She had forgotten how tall he was, how overwhelmingly masculine. His nearness dwarfed the memory of every other man she had ever known, making them all seem pale and insignificant by comparison. A slow fire started in the core of her being, rising hotter and faster with every moment that passed, and it was all she could do to keep from reaching out to touch the dark hair brushing against his shirt collar.

Tyree's eyes danced with amusement and with the sure knowledge of what Rachel was thinking and feeling. The current between them was like a live wire, humming with shared longing, and Tyree whispered her name as he reached out to caress the curve of her cheek.

Rachel stood like one hypnotized as Tyree's long brown fingers touched her skin. Slowly, he tilted her face up. Slowly, he bent down to cover her mouth with his own. Her eyelids flickered down and she swayed toward him,

her arms stealing around his neck, her body molding itself to his. She had dreamed of being in his arms for so long, so long, and now he was here.

She breathed in the scent of him, let her fingers curl in his hair. Slowly, her hands dropped to his shoulders, marveling anew at the strength there before letting her fingers trail down his back, under his shirt to caress his skin. She heard Tyree groan softly, felt the tangible proof of his rising desire, and exulted in the knowledge that he wanted her.

It was like a dream, she thought, gazing up into Tyree's eyes. The rain hissing against the windows, the fire filling the room with primitive warmth. It never occurred to her to refuse him. She had waited for him, wanted him, for far too long to resist now and she remained passive while he undressed her, felt her cheeks blossom with color as his eyes openly admired her bare flesh. She watched through eyes dark with passion as Tyree shed his own clothing, revealing a body of bronze perfection, and then he was stretching out beside her on the couch. She turned readily in his arms, hungry for his kiss, sighing with pleasure as he made her his at last.

Rachel woke in her own bed the following morning with no recollection of how she had gotten there. But she had no trouble recalling what had happened in the parlor the night before, and her cheeks burned with shame.



How would she ever face Tyree again after her wanton behavior of the night before?

Oh, but she would do it all again, she mused. It had been heavenly to be in his arms, to feel his touch, hear his voice. No matter that he did not love her, no matter if he looked at her in that dreadful mocking way, it had been worth it. She was all aflutter as she wondered how to behave when she went downstairs and then a terrible thought crossed her mind. What if he had already gone?

Jumping out of bed, she dressed quickly, brushed her hair, and flew down the stairs, her heart pounding with the need to see him again, dreading the thought that he might already be gone.

Tyree and her father were sitting in the parlor, talking about the weather, when Rachel rushed in.

"Mornin', Rachel," Tyree said pleasantly, and for once there was no mockery in his voice or his eyes.

"Something wrong, daughter?" Halloran asked. "You came running in here like the devil was at your heels."

"No, Pa. I was afraid . . . I mean, I overslept. I'll get breakfast."

Cheeks red with embarrassment, Rachel fled to the kitchen. Glancing out the window, she saw that the world was still swathed in white. A light rain began to fall while she scrambled eggs and fried up a mess of bacon.

She was grinning as she set the table. The rain would turn the roads to slush, making travel dangerous, and that meant Tyree would have to stay another day. The thought filled her with joy and dread at the same time.

Breakfast seemed to last longer than usual. Rachel was thrilled that Tyree was sitting across from her at the table, that he was really here, at last. She could not keep her eyes from his face, could not keep her heart from racing each time he looked in her direction. And yet, she felt uncomfortable when their eyes met. She kept waiting for him to make some veiled remark about the night before. What did he think of her? She professed to hate him, and yet she had fallen into his arms without so much as a verbal protest, her lips eager for his kiss, her body all too ready for his.

When the meal was over, Tyree and her father returned to the parlor, leaving Rachel to tidy up the kitchen. She cleared the table and washed and dried the dishes, hardly conscious of what she was doing. Instead, she was haunted by the memory of Tyree bending over her, his amber eyes alight with desire, his hands gliding over her flesh, arousing her, pleasing her. . . .

Thrusting the image aside, she began to sweep the kitchen floor, but Tyree's swarthy countenance kept intruding on her thoughts. All too clearly, she could picture his dark handsome face and recall the way his body felt pressed against her own. He had a handsome

physique, as well, all hard muscle and bronzed flesh. True, he carried a multitude of scars on his back and chest from old wounds, but somehow they did not repulse her or mar his appearance in the least.

She spent the rest of the morning baking bread and doing a few chores, always conscious of Tyree's presence in the house.

After lunch, Tyree and her father got involved in a game of five card stud while Rachel sat in a chair near the fireplace, a pile of mending in her lap. A fire blazed cheerfully in the hearth, and only the sound of the men's voices and the sharp crackle of the flames disturbed the companionable silence of the room. Somehow, it seemed right for Tyree to be in the house, and Rachel felt strangely content each time she glanced up and saw him comfortably slouched in the chair across from her father.

Dinner passed peacefully, with the men talking amiably about politics and the rising price of beef. Rachel said little, but she did not feel left out of their conversation. Indeed, she felt warm and secure, seated between the two men she loved best in all the world. For she did love him, in spite of everything.

About ten o'clock, Rachel and her father bid Tyree goodnight, leaving him alone in the parlor. Alone for the first time that day, Tyree pulled off his boots and rolled a cigarette. Staring into the fireplace, he tried to remember when he had spent a more pleasant day.



Halloran was good company and he had enjoyed talking to the old man. But it was Rachel who had made the day special, even though they hadn't exchanged more than a dozen words. Nevertheless, he had been acutely aware of her presence in the house, even when she was in another room. Once or twice, it had taken every ounce of his willpower to keep from reaching out to touch her, and it was only the fact that her father slept in the room next to hers that kept him from going to her now.

Stripping off his shirt, Tyree stretched out on the rug in front of the hearth and closed his eyes, only to snap to attention as someone tiptoed into the room and closed the door.

"Rachel!" Tyree murmured, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I . . . I forgot something."

Tyree lifted one black brow. "That so?" he asked, his voice suddenly husky.

Rachel nodded. She looked beguilingly beautiful standing there in a lacy white nightgown embroidered with dainty pink rosebuds. Her long honey-gold hair fell over her shoulders in wild abandon. Her deep blue eyes were wide and scared.

Afraid he would frighten her off, Tyree made no move toward her, though he wanted desperately to go to her, to take her in his arms.

Rachel coughed nervously. Coming here had seemed like such a good idea when she

had been safe in her own room. She wanted Tyree. She admitted it freely, and so she had padded down the hallway, her heart pounding with excitement and anticipation. But now, with his eyes on her face, she felt shy and uncertain.

"I left my . . . my book in here and I . . . please don't make this hard for me, Tyree," she whispered plaintively. "We both know why I'm here."

"Yeah," he said softly, and held out his arms.

Rachel let out a breathy sigh as she moved into Tyree's arms. She spread her hands across his bare back, her face burrowing into the hollow of his shoulder. For long seconds he held her close, his hand moving soft as a whisper over her back and shoulders. She could hear the faint beating of his heart, feel her own heart pounding a quick tattoo as his fingers threaded through her hair. She drew a deep breath and the scent of cigar smoke and leather and man filled her nostrils, stirring her desire.

Gently, he tipped her face up, his head descending toward hers, blocking everything else from her sight. His eyes were like a deep yellow flame, and when his mouth closed over hers, she felt the fire of his kiss all the way to her toes. His lips played across her face, as gentle as rain, nourishing her desire. Her limbs felt suddenly weak, her pulse was racing, her stomach fluttering wildly.

"Tyree." She breathed his name, her voice shaky, her eyes clouded with passion.

"I know," he murmured huskily. "I know."

Carefully, he stretched out on the rug, drawing her down beside him. His hands and lips were gentle, unhurried, as though she were a rare treasure that must not be handled roughly, a fine wine that must be sipped to be appreciated.

Sensations and emotions swirled through her, wrapping her in a cocoon that knew nothing but Tyree's touch, nothing but the pleasure of his kisses.

He caressed the nightgown from her shoulders, his mouth savoring each inch of her skin, his amber eyes telling her she was beautiful, desirable. She ran her fingertips over his back and shoulders, across his broad chest, over his hard flat belly. She uttered a wordless cry of protest when she encountered his trousers and he shrugged them off, grinning at her impatience, then gasped with pleasure as she stroked his thigh.

At last, when she could stand the sweet pain of wanting no more, she drew him close, her arms and legs wrapping around him, certain she would die if he did not satisfy the desire he had aroused.

They came together with a rush, mouths fused together, bodies joined in passion's embrace, as wave after wave of pleasure broke over them. There was no past, no future, only their love, as old as time, as new as the dawn.



For the second time in as many days, Rachel woke in her own bed with no recollection of how she had arrived there. But this morning she felt no shame for what had gone on the night before, no regret, only a warm sense of fulfillment.

Stretching languidly, she gazed out the window, and sighed heavily as her joy turned to ashes. The storm was over and a brilliant sun was rising in the east. Flouncing over onto her stomach, she punched her fist into her pillow. Tyree would be going home now. The words, "Home to Annabelle" whispered in the back of her mind, filling her with bitter despair. How could she have forgotten Annabelle?

She dressed slowly, putting off going downstairs because she didn't want to know if Tyree had already gone. So long as she was in her room, she could pretend he was downstairs in the kitchen, drinking coffee with her father.

She brushed her hair carefully, just in case Tyree was still in the house, applied a bit of color to her mouth. Squaring her shoulders, she started down the stairs. If he was gone, he was gone, and if he wasn't, she was wasting precious time.

Happiness bubbled inside her when she entered the kitchen and found Tyree sitting at the table. He seemed to be in no hurry to return to the Slash W, but spent the morning in the kitchen, chatting with her father as he drank one cup of black coffee after another.

Rachel left them there while she moved

through the house doing her regular morning chores. For some reason, she found herself singing as she worked and she realized with a start that she hadn't felt like singing since Tyree left the Lazy H months ago.

Damn Logan Tyree! Why was it that he was the only man who had the power to stir the passion in her soul? Why didn't she feel the same quivering excitement in her flesh when Clint held her tight? Why was it that Tyree had only to look at her to make her blood sing and her heart beat like a wild thing caught in a trap?

She puzzled over her feelings while she made the beds and dusted the furniture. Tyree was going back to the Slash W. Back to Annabelle's voluptuous charms. The Lazy H was on the verge of being wiped out. They had no livestock left except their saddle horses, a few pigs and chickens; no cash money to speak of, no prospects for the future. But she was singing, and all because Logan Tyree was in the house!

She had missed Tyree. She had worked hard at hating him ever since he had gone to work for Annabelle Walsh, reminding herself time and again that he was a killer, a hired gun with no scruples and no conscience to speak of. He had promised to marry her and then changed his mind, never telling her the reason except to say that Annabelle had made him a better offer. He had ridden out of her life without so much as a backward glance, offer-

ing no explanation for his behavior, no apology. Now, without rhyme or reason, he was back, threatening to steal her heart a second time. Oh, it wasn't fair!

Still, for the first time in months, her heart was light and she was happy, and she knew it was all because Logan Tyree was sitting in the kitchen. Just knowing he was nearby made her feel vibrant and alive, and she hurried through her chores, anxious to return to the kitchen, always afraid he would leave without saying goodbye.

Breathless, she almost ran into the kitchen. Tyree was still there, his long legs crossed negligently in front of him, his hat pushed back on his head.

Tyree's hand reached out to brush hers as she moved to the countertop and began slicing apples for a pie. His touch went through her like an electric shock.

"I don't know what we'll do, come spring," her father was saying. "I owe Mort Walker a sizeable debt. I'd planned to pay him out of next year's calf crop, but now . . ." Halloran shrugged and stared out the window, his brow furrowed. If Lew Harris over at the Cattleman's Bank wouldn't give him an extension on their loan, they would have to sell the ranch to pay the mortgage. The thought rankled. Ellen was buried here. And Tommy. Rachel's roots were here. It was the only home she had ever known. He could not let the place go. He just couldn't.



Discouraged, Halloran muttered something to Tyree about going out to check on the horses and left the house, his steps heavy with defeat.

Rachel concentrated mightily on the ingredients she was measuring into a bowl, keenly aware of Tyree's eyes on her back, and of the fact that they were alone in the house. Where only moments before she had been glad that Tyree was still here, she now wished he would just go and get it over with.

She heard the scrape of a chair as he pushed away from the table and her hands began to tremble. He was standing behind her. She could feel his presence there and she grew suddenly tense as she waited for him to take her in his arms. She knew a moment of swift disappointment when nothing happened.

Abruptly, she whirled around. His yellow cat's eyes trapped hers in a long lingering gaze filled with desire and Rachel felt her knees go weak as he reached for her. She experienced a moment of panic, not because he was going to take her in his arms, but because she was so helpless to resist him. Her feet felt rooted to the floor and she swayed against him, powerless to stem the powerful urgings of her own heart.

Tyree's kiss was gentle, his hands light on her shoulders as he drew her close. Time seemed to stand still and Rachel wished that she could stay thus in his arms forever.

With a muffled oath, Tyree turned away and

strode out the back door, leaving Rachel to stare after him. For a moment, she was speechless, and then she ran out the door after him, calling his name.

Tyree stopped, waiting for her to catch up. His expression was cold when he turned to face her.

"I love you," Rachel said in a rush. "Please don't go back to Annabelle."

"Don't waste your love on me, Rachel," Tyree said in a rough tone. "I'm not worth it."

"You are!"

"No. I'm all the things you accused me of being when I first came here."

"I don't believe that. Not any more."

"You believed it well enough then."

"Please stay, Tyree. I'll make you happy. I'll live and die for you. Please don't go."

"Rachel, I . . ." He swore under his breath. The love shining in her eyes reached out to him, warmer than the summer sun, trusting as a young child who believed wanting something bad enough could make it so.

Tyree gazed into Rachel's eager, upturned face. He had never intended to make love to her. He had only wanted to see her, make certain she and her father were doing all right. Even when he had kissed her that first night, he had expected nothing more, but she had been on fire for him, her arms stealing around his neck, her body pressing against his, arousing his own. What had happened that night and the next had seemed so right at

the time. But now, when he was about to return to the Slash W and Annabelle, it all seemed so wrong.

Feeling like the worst kind of heel, Tyree turned and walked quickly toward the barn.

Rachel did not follow him.

Annabelle was furious when she found out where Tyree had weathered the storm. She ranted and raved for three days, calling him all manner of names: names no decent woman should even know, let alone speak aloud. Tyree let her carry on until, at last, she ran out of steam.

"I'm going into town," he said the morning of the fourth day. "You want anything?"

"Town?" Annabelle queried suspiciously. "What for?"

"I don't think it's any of your business how I spend my free time," Tyree drawled, grinning at her in a way that made her eyes flare with anger.

"Well, you're wrong!" Annabelle shrieked. "You don't have any free time. I bought your time, gunfighter. And paid for it. *All* of it. And don't you forget it."

"Whatever you say," Tyree muttered, unruffled by her outburst. "I'll be back early."

Mort Walker was a short, florid-faced individual with round blue eyes and chin whiskers the color of tobacco. He looked askance at Tyree as the gunman pressed a wad of



currency into his fat little hand, admonishing him to mark John Halloran's debt paid in full, and to keep quiet about where the money came from.

"Yessir, Mr. Tyree," Walker agreed in a cowed tone. "I don't want any trouble with you."

"And you won't get any so long as you keep your mouth shut about this."

Lew Harris was a tall, dignified gentleman with a mane of silver hair and eyes the color of pewter. He readily accepted Tyree's money in payment on the Halloran loan, but protested at having to keep Tyree's name out of the transaction.

"I'll have to tell Mr. Halloran something when he asks where the money came from," Harris protested briskly.

"Tell him anything you want," Tyree replied with a wry grin. "Anything but the truth."

"You don't expect me to lie?" Harris gasped, horrified.

"I don't care what you do," Tyree warned. "But Halloran is not to know where that money came from. And if he finds out, I'll be back."

Tyree's threat to return produced the desired results. "Very well," Harris agreed meekly. "I'll think of something."

Satisfied with the day's events, Tyree went to Bowsher's Saloon to while away the rest of the afternoon. There would be hell to pay if Annabelle found out who had settled

Halloran's debts, he mused, but he didn't really care. Annabelle was at her best when she was mad. Perhaps that was why she got mad so often.

It was after midnight when he returned to the Slash W. There was a light burning in Annabelle's room and he stepped inside without knocking, intending to tell her he had picked up her mail while he was in town. He grinned as Morgan Yarnell's curly red head popped up from under the covers, his expression sheepish and smug at the same time.

"Sorry," Tyree murmured. Stifling the urge to laugh, he backed out of the room and closed the door.

Yarnell accosted Tyree early the next morning, a satisfied smirk on his handsome young face, a challenge lurking in the back of his deep-set brown eyes.

"Knock first, next time," Yarnell said curtly.

"What makes you think you'll have a next time?" Tyree retorted.

"Because she's through with you," Yarnell said insolently. "From now on, it's me and Annabelle. You're out of it."

"That so?"

Yarnell swelled up like a turkey gobbler. "You heard me say so, didn't you?"

Tyree shrugged indifferently. "I've heard you say you're the fastest man with a gun, too, but that doesn't make it so."

"Just name the time and the place, old man," Yarnell said daringly. "I'll be there."

The next day was Sunday. Tyree slept late and woke to the sound of gunfire. His first thought was that someone was attacking the ranch, but then he realized some of the hands were indulging in a little target practice to while away the time.

Rising, Tyree pulled on his pants and boots and made his way to the kitchen where he poured himself a cup of coffee before going out onto the back veranda.

In the yard, Yarnell and three other men were shooting at bottles lined up along the top rail of the nearest corral.

Tyree watched with professional interest as Morgan Yarnell drew and fired. The man was fast, and he never missed. The other slingers were good, too. They hit their targets nine times out of ten, and they unleathered their weapons with little wasted motion, but they lacked the inbred eye-and-hand coordination that came naturally to men like Yarnell. And men like Tyree.

Yarnell turned around, expecting to see Annabelle on the veranda. The welcome in his eyes turned to contempt when he saw Tyree.

"Like to try a few, gunfighter?" Yarnell said with a sneer.

"Only kids waste their time showing off," Tyree retorted disdainfully.

"What's the matter, old man?" Yarnell



taunted maliciously. "Afraid to find out I'm faster than you are? Or afraid you'll miss?"

Tyree snorted. "You've got the fastest mouth, that's for sure. What do you do, talk your opponents to death?"

Yarnell turned red around the ears as the other men began to laugh. Yarnell had a quick temper, Tyree mused, and that could be dangerous.

"I'll take you on, any time, any place," Yarnell shouted. "Just name it!"

"That so?"

"Damn right!" Yarnell took a step forward, his hands poised over his guns, a gleam of anticipation in his coffee-colored eyes. "I can outdraw you any day of the week, old man," he boasted. "And I'm ready to prove it here and now."

They might have settled it then and there if Annabelle hadn't appeared on the scene.

"Quit it, you two!" she snapped, annoyed by their childish bickering. "There's a squatter setting up housekeeping out near Tabletop Mesa. I don't know how he made it here through the snow, but I want him out." Annabelle's green eyes settled on Tyree. "And I want them dead this time."

Thirty minutes later, the two gunmen rode out of the yard. Yarnell rode his horse like a knight going to battle, his eyes alert and eager, a lethal smile on his thin lips.

Tyree rode easy in the saddle, conscious of Yarnell's eagerness to use the pair of matched

.44's he wore in cross-draw holsters. He was like a wolf on the scent of blood, Tyree thought sourly.

The man they had come to roust had a handsome wife and six sandy-haired kids. They were living out of an old Conestoga wagon that had seen better days. The woman was stirring up a big pot of stew when Tyree and Yarnell rode into their camp. The man was cutting timber. Slash W timber, Tyree mused absently, because this time the intruders really were on Slash W property.

The kids were helping their father, chattering happily while they trimmed the branches off the felled trees. A boy of about three was making a pile out of wood chips.

The man was the first to notice the two riders. His eyes were light brown and they reflected a quick apprehension as the strangers drew rein beside the wagon. He sent a glance at his rifle, propped against a log some fifteen feet away, hopelessly out of reach if there was trouble.

The woman threw her husband an anxious look. Fear was plainly etched on her face, and in her clear blue eyes. Her hair was long and reddish-brown, the figure beneath the worn calico dress still firm and trim in spite of bearing a half-dozen children.

"This is Slash W land," Yarnell said brusquely. "You're not wanted here."

"I was told this is open range," the man said affably, "and I intend to homestead it."

"And I intend to bury you on it," Yarnell threatened. Lazily, his hand moved toward the gun riding on his left hip.

There was a sudden explosion as the woman pulled a little over-and-under derringer from her apron pocket and fired at Yarnell. The slug creased the young gunman's cheek, and he hollered with pained surprise as he glared at the woman.

The man was moving now, his face white with horror as he lunged for his rifle.

With an oath, Tyree slapped leather and fired a round into the squatter's shoulder. As the man fell to the ground, barely conscious, the oldest boy, a gangly youth of about sixteen, made a wild dive for his father's rifle. Rolling to his feet, the boy leveled the gun at Tyree.

"Don't do it, kid," Tyree warned.

Shaking his head, the boy pulled back the hammer of the old Spencer rifle. His finger was white around the trigger, his face streaked with tears.

Tyree swore softly as he lined his Colt on the boy's right shoulder. It was a dirty business, shooting at kids, even when you weren't shooting to kill.

He was squeezing the trigger of the Colt when a bright red stain blossomed on the boy's chest. A look of surprise spread over the boy's face as the slug from Yarnell's gun slammed him to the ground. A convulsive



tremor shook his slight frame, and then he was still, his pale blue eyes wide and staring.

Tyree's yellow eyes drilled into Yarnell. "Don't ever do that again," he warned in a voice heavy with menace.

Yarnell looked surprised. "I just saved your life!" he exclaimed, punching the spent cartridges from the cylinder of his gun.

"I've been killing my own snakes since you were in three-corner pants," Tyree said coldly. "I think I can manage just a little longer." His mouth curved down in a disdainful smile. "Or maybe that's how you got that big rep you're always bragging about, killing kids."

"Anybody with a gun in his hand is fair game," Yarnell said brashly.

"That right?" Tyree's voice was cool, soft as silk. "There's a gun in my hand."

Yarnell accepted the challenge without hesitation. He was thumbing back the hammer of his Navy Colt when Tyree shot him out of the saddle.

"Fair game," Tyree muttered under his breath. "C'mon, ma'am," he said, holstering his gun and swinging out of the saddle. "Let's look after your old man."

Annabelle was not happy with the news of Yarnell's death. She had grown rather fond of the young gunman in the past few weeks, as fond as she ever grew of anyone. Yarnell had been an accomplished lover and while she

would have preferred to have Tyree in her bed, she knew instinctively that Yarnell had proved easier to handle.

She was giving Tyree the rough side of her tongue in the parlor later that day when he reached out and slapped her, hard, across the face.

"Consider that my resignation," he drawled impudently.

Stunned by the blow, Annabelle raised a hand to her throbbing cheek. No man had ever dared strike her. "You'll be sorry for that," she hissed.

"I've been sorry for a lot of things lately," Tyree replied with a shrug. "Just remember, if anything happens to Rachel or her old man, anything at all, I'll be back to take it out of your pretty hide."

"Come back here!" Annabelle shrieked as he walked purposefully toward the door. "No one walks out on me. No one! Damn you, Logan Tyree, I'll make you sorry you were ever born!"

## *Chapter 17*

*T*yree was feeling good as he rode out of the Slash W yard. At last, he was his own man again, unhindered by ties of any kind, free as the wind.

Putting his heels to the gray's flanks, he headed east, toward Sunset Canyon and the Mescalero. Perhaps he would hole up there for awhile until he decided what his next move would be. It would be good to see the People again, to live in the old way, hear the old songs.

He had gone about three miles when he drew the stallion to a halt in the shade of a yellow bluff. Rachel. He swore softly as the memory of the nights they had spent together came to mind. The fragrance of her hair, the



way she felt in his arms, the touch and the taste and the smell of her, all were fresh in his mind, and he knew he had to see her again. Perhaps, if she still wanted him, they would get married after all, even have some kids before it was too late . . . .

Tyree frowned as he urged the gray to a walk. He had never thought much about getting old before, but it came to him suddenly that he was almost thirty-five. Not a vast age, by any means, but mighty old for a man in his line of work. He grunted softly as he considered getting married again. He had never really thought of it seriously, not even that night at the Jorgensen place when Rachel had begged him not to go after Larkin and the others.

But now, somehow, the idea of settling down with Rachel didn't sound so bad, and he smiled faintly as he reined the gray toward the Lazy H. Imagine, Logan Tyree, drifter, gunman, escaped con, a family man!

Rachel came to the front door looking as fresh and lovely as a spring day and Tyree felt a peculiar catch in his throat. Damn, but it made him feel good just looking at her.

"Tyree," Rachel murmured, looking confused. "Is anything wrong?"

"No. Can I come in?"

Rachel hesitated for just a moment, her heart beating wildly, then she opened the door. "Come on in. I was just making a cake. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Sure." He followed her into the kitchen,

dropped into a chair while she took a cup from the shelf and poured him a cup of steaming black coffee.

Rachel was flustered by Tyree's unexpected appearance. She could feel his eyes on her back as she poured the cake batter into the pan. Sliding the pan into the oven, she turned to face him.

"What . . . why are you here?" she asked anxiously. "Did Annabelle send you?"

"I'm through with Annabelle," Tyree said quietly. "I quit today."

Rachel's smile was radiant. At last, her prayers had been answered. Secretly, she was dying to know why Tyree had quit the Slash W, but her intuition warned her not to pry. He would tell her why he had quit in his own good time, and if not, well, it didn't really matter. He was here and that was all that mattered.

She went willingly into his arms when he reached for her, lifted her face eagerly for his kiss, sighed as he crushed her close.

Tyree grinned as he pressed his lips to Rachel's hair. Once, he had asked her if she thought the love of a good woman would make him mend his evil ways. He wasn't quite sure how she had done it, but it had worked.

"You still want to get married?" Tyree asked gruffly.

"Yes," Rachel answered happily. "Oh, yes!"

"Well, set the date. I'll talk to your old man about it tonight, after dinner."

\* \* \*

John Halloran did not seem surprised to find Tyree sitting at the dinner table that night, nor was he taken aback by the gunman's desire to marry Rachel. He gladly gave the pair his blessing, and Rachel set the date for May 25, just three months away.

In the days that followed, Rachel could not stop smiling. Her spirits soared, her feet flew from task to task, her eyes sparkled with happiness. A kiss from Tyree sent her smiling off to bed, a kiss in the morning set the tone for the day. She watched, pleased, as he followed her father around the Lazy H, learning the ins and outs of running a cattle ranch.

Nights, after dinner, Tyree sat in the parlor with her father, going over the books, debating the necessity of hiring on some help for the summer.

It was during one of their nightly sessions that Halloran remarked, "Funny thing. Somebody paid off my loan at the Cattleman's Bank. Squared my debt at the general store, too."

"That right?" Tyree murmured.

"Yeah. Wasn't for that, we'd be out in the cold. I don't suppose you have any idea who might have settled my accounts in town?"

"Beats me," Tyree muttered. "Going around doing good deeds ain't exactly my style."

"Yeah," Halloran agreed. He looked the tall gunman square in the eye. "Still, if I knew who it was, I'd sure be beholdin' to him. He really saved my neck."



"Some do-gooder in town, no doubt," Tyree suggested.

"Okay, okay," Halloran conceded amiably. "Have it your way. But if you ever find out who it was, you tell him thanks from the Lazy H."

Sunday morning, they all went to church. Tyree had gone into town earlier in the week and bought a pair of brown slacks and a cream colored coat, as well as a couple of shirts, a new pair of boots, and a new Frontier Colt. He donned the brown pants, a tan shirt and the coat for church, and Rachel thought he looked terribly handsome in his new duds. A thrill of excitement danced along her spine as she laid her hand on his arm. And then she frowned.

"Do you have to wear your gun to church?" she asked.

Tyree nodded, his eyes warning her not to argue.

"All right," she said softly. "I understand."

Tyree smiled at her. "I'll hang it up one day," he promised. "But not just yet."

"Okay," Rachel said, smiling back at him. "But I'll hold you to it."

"I'm sure you will."

The good ladies of the town treated Tyree to the same disapproving stares as before, but Tyree just tipped his hat and smiled pleasantly as he followed Rachel and her father into the pew. Tyree's smile, when it was not cold and cruel or mocking, could charm the spots off a leopard, and several of the town dowagers

began to think maybe they had misjudged the man. After all, how bad could he be if Rachel approved of him? And she quite obviously approved. A blind man could see that. Why, she hardly took her eyes off the man for a moment, and the open adoration in her eyes caused the good ladies of the town to take a second look at Logan Tyree. And they saw that, besides being something of a gentleman, after all, he was quite handsome to boot. Not in the usual, clean-cut way, to be sure, but extremely handsome nevertheless.

"You'll have the women eating out of your hand in no time at all if you keep smiling at them like that," Rachel teased, squeezing Tyree's hand. "Just remember, I saw you first."

Tyree was all charm and sweet talk after the meeting, too. He tipped his hat to the ladies again, shook hands with several of the men, complimented the Reverend Jenkins on a fine sermon, smiled winningly at Carol Ann.

Carol Ann returned Tyree's smile hesitantly, then gave Rachel a friendly hug.

"Carol Ann!" Rachel exclaimed. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Guess what? Tyree and I are going to be married in May!"

Tyree grinned good-naturedly as Carol Ann blurted, "Oh, no!"

"I thought you would be happy for me," Rachel said coolly, stung by her best friend's blatant shock and disapproval.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," Carol Ann murmured

contritely. "Truly, I am. It's just such a surprise. I . . . congratulations to you both."

Mollified, Rachel said, "You'll be my maid of honor, won't you?"

"Of course." Carol Ann glanced at Tyree. What did Rachel see in him? The man was a murderer, a hired killer. He had shot down four men in Bowsher's Saloon not very long ago, and everyone said he had killed Job Walsh in cold blood. She flushed guiltily as Tyree's eyes met hers, quickly looked away.

"Can you come over Friday?" Rachel asked, excited once more. "We'll have to decide on colors and I want you to help me with a pattern and, oh, there's so much to do. You will help me?"

"Of course I will. See you Friday. Good day, Mr. Halloran. Mr. Tyree."

Tyree was frowning as he handed Rachel into the buggy. "You're not going to turn our wedding into a big shindig, are you?"

"Not too big," Rachel promised, smoothing her skirt over her hips. "But I do want a nice one. After all, a lovely wedding is something every girl dreams of from the minute she realizes boys and girls are different."

"Girls are different, all right," Tyree muttered, climbing in beside Rachel.

Heads turned as the Halloran buggy made its way out of town, and more than a few of the single young women wondered why they had ever thought Logan Tyree a boorish clod and not worthy of their notice. He was really quite



a gentleman. And so very, very handsome, especially when he smiled.

John Halloran slapped his thigh with glee when they reached the road that led to the Lazy H. "Damn, Tyree," he chuckled, "I never knew you had so much charm. I think Rachel's right. I think you'll have old Mrs. Fairchild and Dorothy Monahan and all the other old cats inviting you over to Sunday supper before you're through."

Halloran's words proved to be prophetic. The redoubtable Mrs. Fairchild cornered Rachel in Thorngood's General Store the next day and invited her and her young man to dinner the following Sunday after church.

Rachel accepted politely, then fretted the entire week, fearing the evening would turn out to be a disaster. She dressed carefully that night, choosing a light blue muslin with puffy sleeves, a square neck, and a full skirt. Tyree looked wonderful in a pair of black whipcord britches and a wine-red shirt.

Rachel's fears for the evening were quickly put to rest. Tyree played the country gentleman to the hilt. It was all Rachel could do to keep from laughing out loud when he gallantly kissed Mrs. Fairchild's pudgy pink hand.

Selma Fairchild blushed to the roots of her carefully coiffed gray hair as Tyree made a courtly bow over her hand, but from that night on, Logan Tyree could do no wrong in her sight.

Rachel listened in astonishment as Tyree

politely answered Mrs. Fairchild's none-too-subtle questions about his past. Of course, many of Tyree's answers were lies. His past was painful and was not something to be discussed over dinner. But he freely admitted to being an orphan and to being raised by Catholic nuns. He did not mention the fact that his father was a half-breed horse thief, or that his mother had been a whore. Nor did he mention that he had lived with the Indians, though he did admit to having some Indian blood in his background.

The following Sunday, they went through the same thing again, at Dorothy Monahan's house. Indeed, for the next five Sundays, they ate out at a different home as the town dowagers took turns entertaining Rachel and her beau. The consensus was that, despite his unsavory past, Logan Tyree was a gentleman and a good catch.

Carol Ann spent many days at the Lazy H in the weeks that followed, helping Rachel make plans for the wedding. Secluded in Rachel's bedroom, the two girls spent hours sewing their dresses. Carol Ann's dress was pale pink silk, with a high ruffled collar, long sleeves edged in lace, and a full skirt. Rachel's wedding gown was a study in simple elegance. Made of white taffeta, it was uncluttered by frills or bows, save for the dainty white lace that was gathered along the throat and cuffs. Her veil trailed to the ground in a cloud of soft white.

"Remember how we used to dream about the men we would marry," Carol Ann mused one sultry afternoon. "I always planned to marry a banker or a lawyer; somebody with brown hair and brown eyes, who would think I was the most wonderful girl in the world. And you always wanted to marry a man with blond hair and blue eyes, like Clint."

"Things don't always turn out the way we plan," Rachel remarked, threading her needle. "I certainly never planned to fall in love with Tyree. I always thought I'd marry Clint, but the magic just isn't there. I love him, but I'm not in love with him. Do you know what I mean? He'll never be more to me than just a good friend."

"That's all he's ever been to me, too," Carol Ann said wistfully. "And I would so like to be more than just a friend."

Rachel glanced at her friend in surprise. "Why, you're in love with Clint, aren't you? I never dreamed. Why haven't you ever told me?"

Carol Ann shrugged. "Clint has always been in love with you. Everybody knows that. And I always thought you cared for him, too, so . . . golly, Rachel, you're my best friend. How could I even think about Clint when he was supposed to be your beau?"

"Well, he's not my beau any longer," Rachel said, giving Carol Ann a hug. "Have you ever told Clint how you feel?"



"Of course not!" Carol Ann exclaimed, mortified at the very idea. "And don't you dare say a word, promise?"

"I promise, but I think you're making a big mistake. You've got to let him know you're interested."

"I couldn't," Carol Ann said, shaking her head. "I just couldn't. He has to make the first move. And I know he never will."

With a sigh, Rachel turned her attention back to her dress. Carol Ann was a pretty girl, but she was so shy, most men never paid any notice to her. She would be perfect for Clint, Rachel mused. They were very much alike, both warm, friendly souls who loved to read and listen to music.

Pulling her thoughts from Carol Ann and Clint, Rachel thought about Tyree. They had very little in common, she mused. There was nothing similar in their backgrounds, or in their interests. In truth, she did not know what Tyree's interests were, other than the fact that he liked poker and whiskey and long black cigars. He had never mentioned wanting a place of his own, or wanting children. She didn't know if he liked to read, or if he liked to travel, or if he'd ever had any ambition to be anything but what he was.

Pausing to set in a sleeve, Rachel vowed to learn more about the man she planned to marry. She would learn what he liked, and then strive diligently to give him those things.

Surely, if she delved deep enough, she would find they shared more in common than the fierce passion that burned between them.

News of Rachel's engagement did not sit well with everyone. Annabelle Walsh was furious with Tyree, and swore publicly and privately that she hated him. But she did not want Rachel Halloran to have him.

Sitting alone in the Slash W ranch house, she stared into the cold stone fireplace, her lovely brow creased and thoughtful. Her bargain with Tyree was off now, and that meant Halloran was fair game as far as she was concerned. But before she could move against the Lazy H, she had to dispose of Tyree. His threat to come after her had been a warning she could not ignore. She did not doubt for a moment that he would make her pay if anything happened to Rachel or Halloran or the Lazy H.

Eyes narrowed, Annabelle rubbed her cheek, remembering the pain and humiliation Tyree had inflicted upon her the day he walked out. He would pay for that slap, she vowed, and pay dearly . . . .

Clint Wesley viewed Rachel's engagement with anger and jealousy. He had been calling on Rachel regularly for more than two years, courting her in his own shy style, hoping that one day she would agree to be his wife. He had been taking her to church, and to socials,

to parties and dances. They had gone walking together in the moonlight. He had dinner at the Lazy H at least once a week, but somehow their relationship had never gotten past the hand-holding stage. And then Tyree had appeared on the scene. Damn the man!

Wesley scowled darkly as he glanced out the jailhouse window. Unconsciously, his hand stroked the butt of his holstered Colt. He had been practicing his draw for several months, and it was smooth and fast.

But was it fast enough?





## *Chapter 18*

The spring social was one of the most looked forward to events of the year. Everyone in the valley was invited, and everyone attended. For this one night, old grudges were forgotten or forgiven, petty quarrels were put aside, debts were not mentioned, and having a good time was top priority.

Rachel hummed softly as she dressed for the big dance. It was good to be alive, good to be in love. She laughed with exuberance as she slipped her dress over her head and smoothed it over her hips. Twirling before the mirror, she was pleased to see that the color was very becoming. The dark lavender made her skin glow like rich cream, and turned her eyes to violet.

Wrapping a light wool shawl around her bare shoulders, she floated down the stairway. Tyree was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. Dark brown trousers hugged his long muscular legs, a rich maroon broadcloth coat complemented his dark complexion. He smiled at her and Rachel felt a little thrill of excitement dance in the pit of her stomach as she lifted her face for his kiss.

Moments later, John Halloran stepped into the room. "Ready?" he asked cheerfully, and the three of them left the house, chatting amiably.

When they arrived at the schoolhouse, the dance had already started. The desks had been removed, and the ceiling was hung with colored streamers and lamps. Long tables were set up along the edge of the dance floor, laden with coffee and punch and cakes and cookies. Couples whirled around the floor, talking and laughing, as the musicians played a waltz, a polka, a fast-paced reel. On this one night, the men did not leave their ladies to argue about cattle and crops and the rising price of land. Instead, they gallantly courted their women, plying them with compliments and attention, and the women responded by laughing and flirting outrageously with their husbands or beaux.

The next hour passed pleasantly. There was an abundance of food and drink. The fiddler played tirelessly, now something fast, now something slow, now fast again. Rachel was



constantly amazed at the wide variety of numbers that he played throughout the night.

During a brief lull, Annabelle Walsh made her entrance on the arm of a tall, dark-haired man. Annabelle looked exquisite. Her gown, a brilliant green silk, had been imported from France. The bodice clung to her ample bosom like a second skin, leaving little to the imagination. The full skirt swished softly as she walked. Her hair was piled high atop her head, save for one long red curl that fell over her left shoulder. Green satin slippers hugged her feet.

Tyree frowned as he noticed Annabelle's only adornment was the ruby teardrop he had given her for Christmas.

Moments later, Clint Wesley strode into the room, his badge shining brightly on the pocket of his dark blue coat. It was, Tyree mused sourly, shaping up to be one hell of a night.

The single men, both young and old, flocked around Annabelle, vying for her attention, arguing back and forth over who had the next dance, and the next. Wesley stood with his back against the east wall, his blue eyes moody as he watched Rachel dance by with Tyree.

Damn, the Marshal mused to himself. Why hadn't he proposed sooner? Why had he thought he had to wait until he had more money? Why hadn't he grabbed her and hauled her off to the preacher's before it was too late? But then, like everyone else, he had

taken it for granted that Rachel would marry him. And now he had lost her. Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe, if he told her how he felt, she would change her mind. It was a slim chance, but one he had to take.

Squaring his shoulders, Clint marched boldly onto the dance floor and tapped Tyree on the shoulder.

Tyree's eyebrows went up in surprise as he surrendered Rachel. It would have been pleasant to tell Wesley to go to hell, but Tyree knew such a thing would have made Rachel angry. And he had no desire to make her mad.

"Evening, Clint," Rachel said, smiling warmly. "Isn't it a lovely night?"

"Lovely," Clint agreed. "Rachel, I love you more than anything in the world. I want you to marry me. I know I've been a fool not to speak up sooner, but I wanted to have enough money put away to buy you a house of your own. I wanted to be able to give you everything you wanted, to spoil you. I love you. I . . . you must know how I feel, how I've always felt. I thought, I hoped, you felt the same."

Rachel stared at him, her mouth slightly open, completely surprised at his outburst. Why had he chosen this particular moment to bare his soul? And what could she possibly say?

"Rachel?" Clint whispered her name, his heart in his eyes.

"Clint, I . . . I love you, but I'm not in love

with you. I . . . it wouldn't have made any difference if you had a lot of money, or if you had asked me to marry you months ago. I love Tyree. I don't know how it happened, I can't explain it, but I love him with all my heart."

Clint nodded. There was nothing more to say.

Standing at the makeshift bar located at the back of the room, Tyree ordered a beer. From the corner of his eye, he saw Annabelle swishing toward him, and he muttered a mild oath under his breath.

"Good evening, Tyree," Annabelle purred.

"Miss Walsh," he replied formally.

"That's a lovely tune they're playing," Annabelle remarked. "It's always been one of my favorites."

"If you want to dance, just say so," Tyree growled, annoyed by her coy attitude.

"I want to dance."

With a scowl, Tyree led her onto the dance floor, gingerly took her in his arms. He would as soon hold a snake, he mused. Certainly a rattler could not be more dangerous than the green-eyed vixen gazing up at him through the dark veil of her lashes.

"How have you been, Tyree?" Annabelle asked, her fingers kneading his left shoulder.

"Fine. You?"

"Fine. My new man, Ricardo, is very pleasant. So much more agreeable than you ever were."

"Then why aren't you dancing with him?"



"He dances like an elephant," Annabelle replied, laughing coquettishly. "Few big men are as light on their feet as you are."

"Save the flattery."

"Rachel looks well with the Marshal, don't you think? Such an attractive young couple."

"Yeah. Thanks for the dance."

Tyree left Annabelle as soon as the music ended, swiftly crossed the floor to where Rachel and Wesley were standing. Without a word, Tyree took Rachel by the arm and guided her, none too gently, toward the punch bowl.

"Tyree, you're hurting me," Rachel protested, pulling away. "What's the matter with you, anyway? You look ready to explode."

"Just jealous, I guess," Tyree admitted somewhat sheepishly.

"*You're* jealous!" Rachel exclaimed. "How do you think it makes me feel to see you with Annabelle, knowing the two of you used to be . . . friends."

"Rachel, I never made love to Annabelle."

"Never?" Could it be true? Oh, please let it be true.

"Never." Tyree grinned at Rachel, his good humor restored. "Let's go home," he suggested, throwing her a wicked glance, "and be friends."

"Tyree, you know we agreed to wait until after the wedding before we . . . you know."

"Change your mind," he whispered.

"Tyree, behave yourself," Rachel scolded, but inwardly she was pleased. It was a heady feeling, knowing he found her desirable. Almost, she was sorry they had decided not to be intimate again until after the wedding.

Unmindful of the eyes watching them, Tyree pulled Rachel into his arms and gave her a kiss that took her breath away.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" he asked.

"I'm sure," Rachel said with regret. "Anyway, we can't just go off and leave my father here with no way home."

"I don't think he'd even miss us," Tyree said, jerking a thumb in Halloran's direction. "He hasn't left his lady love's side all night. She'd probably be glad for an excuse to put him up for the night so they could be 'friends'."

"Tyree!" Rachel gasped, shocked at the very idea of her father and Claire Whiting doing anything so scandalous.

"Okay, okay. Come on, let's dance."

From across the room, Clint Wesley felt a sharp stab of jealousy tear at his heart. Somehow, some way, he would get rid of Logan Tyree and win Rachel's love.

Annabelle's eyes burned with a dark and fierce rage of their own as Tyree and a blushing Rachel whirled around the dance floor, oblivious to everyone else. Rachel's face was radiant, her eyes warm with devotion as she

gazed up at Tyree. And Tyree! When had he ever smiled at her like that! His amber eyes were ablaze with desire and, yes, Annabelle thought angrily, with love. Love for that snit in his arms. Abruptly, a slow smile spread across Annabelle's face as she spied the Marshal standing across the room.

Wesley looked puzzled as Annabelle Walsh glided toward him. He had never met the woman, but he was aware of her flawless beauty, and of the great wealth she controlled.

"Marshal Wesley," Annabelle said, extending her hand. "I don't believe we've ever been introduced."

"No," Clint replied, taking her hand. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I was wondering if I might have a few minutes of your time?"

"Now?"

"Yes, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"Could we go outside, perhaps?"

"Sure," Clint said. Feeling like a serf escorting a queen, he took Annabelle's arm and guided her around the edge of the dance floor and out the side door.

Tyree let out a deep breath as he saw the two of them disappear into the shadows. There was trouble brewing, sure as death and hell, and Annabelle was the master brewer.

Outside, Annabelle smiled up at the Marshal as she took his hand in hers. "I have



something to tell you," she said, her voice low and confiding. "Something important, but . . ." She looked over her shoulder, as if fearful of being watched.

"You can tell me," Clint assured her. "Don't be afraid."

Fluttering her lashes prettily, Annabelle stepped closer to the Marshal, as if his nearness gave her courage. "I have proof that Logan Tyree killed my brother."

"Proof!" Clint exclaimed. "Where? What kind of proof?"

"A signed confession."

"No shit! Excuse me, Miss Walsh. But where did you get such a thing?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," Annabelle murmured. "But it is quite genuine, I assure you."

Wesley grinned exuberantly. At last! He had Logan Tyree by the short hairs. A signed confession! It was too good to be true.

"This confession," he said eagerly. "Do you have it with you?"

"No. It's in my safe at the ranch." Annabelle smiled up at the Marshal. "But if you will come by tomorrow afternoon, I'll be glad to let you see it."

"I'll be there," Clint assured her. "You can count on that."

"About noon?" Annabelle asked.

"Noon," Clint said.

Hardly able to contain his excitement, Wesley escorted Annabelle back to the school-

house, then hurried toward his office. The circuit judge would be coming to town in less than two weeks. With Tyree's signed confession as evidence, the trial would be a mere formality, followed by a quick hanging. And then, at long last, Logan Tyree would be out of his life, and Rachel's, once and for all.

## *Chapter 19*

Tyree and Rachel lingered over a second cup of coffee the following morning. Tyree was wondering just what kind of mischief Annabelle had been stirring up with the Marshal when Rachel's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"What do you want to do after the wedding, Tyree?" she asked, smiling prettily.

"After?" He lifted one black brow. "The same as most couples do, I reckon."

Rachel blushed under his lusty gaze. "I didn't mean that. I mean, are you going to be happy staying on here? Would you rather go somewhere else and start a place of our own? Do you want children? Do you like beets?"



Tyree laughed softly. "Don't most women find out this kind of stuff before they say yes?"

"I guess so. But our courtship hasn't been exactly normal, you know."

Tyree nodded, his expression indulgent.

"I'd really like to know," Rachel said. "We've never talked about our future, never made any plans. Sometimes I feel as though I hardly know you."

"Getting cold feet?"

"Of course not."

Tyree's gaze drifted past Rachel to the window. He stared outside for a moment before returning his gaze to her face. "I've never spent much time making plans for the future. Guess I figured I probably didn't have one."

Rachel nodded. "I understand. But that's all changed now."

"Yeah."

Rachel cocked her head to one side. "You haven't answered my questions yet."

"I know, but let me ask you one. Do you want to leave here and start over somewhere else?"

"Not really. I love it here."

"I know you do. So if it's all right with your old man, let's just sit tight."

"I'd like that," Rachel said. She leaned across the table and squeezed Tyree's hand. "I don't think I could bear to leave the Lazy H. My whole life has been spent here."

"That's settled then. As for children," Tyree

said with a grin, "I guess I'd like nine or ten."

"Nine or ten!" Rachel exclaimed, blinking at him. "Are you kidding?"

"No, but I guess I'd settle for three or four. However many you want, as long as they're all girls as beautiful as their mother."

"I want boys," Rachel remarked. "Lots of boys with black hair and blue eyes."

"Boys are nothing but trouble," Tyree replied quietly. "I'm proof of that."

"Don't be silly. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Am I?" Tyree's eyes probed hers and it occurred to Rachel that beneath all his arrogance there lurked a little boy after all, one who was looking for love and acceptance, a little boy who had been bad so long he couldn't believe anyone could love him.

"The very best thing," Rachel answered sincerely.

Tyree grinned at her. Then, rising to his feet, he lifted her from her chair and gave her a resounding kiss on the mouth.

"Got to go," he said briskly. "I'm a farmer, now. There's stock to feed out on the range, woman! There's fields to plow and harnesses to mend. But I'll be back for lunch."

So saying, he picked up his hat and ambled out the door, leaving Rachel to stare after him, her eyes dancing with amusement.

The next day, Tyree was sitting on the front porch of the Lazy H, mending a bridle for the

gray, when Clint Wesley rode into the yard.

Rising, Tyree tossed the bridle aside and moved to stand near the steps as the Marshal swung out of the saddle.

"You're a long way from town," Tyree remarked.

"I've come to take you in," Wesley said, the words coming hard and fast, before his courage deserted him. "I have a warrant here, charging you with the murder of Job Walsh."

Tyree looked faintly amused. "That so?"

"Yes, that's so!"

"Seems I told you once I wasn't going back to jail."

"So you said."

"I haven't changed my mind."

"Be that as it may, I'm taking you in. Today."

"Suit yourself, kid," Tyree growled, no longer amused. "I'd just as soon kill you as look at you, so make your play or get the hell out of here."

For a moment, it looked like Wesley would back down; but then, with a suddenness that surprised both men, he reached for his gun.

Tyree reacted instinctively. His left-handed draw was smooth as silk and his Colt was out of the holster, the hammer cocked, the muzzle directed at Wesley's chest, before the Marshal's gun cleared leather.

Wesley's face went chalk white as he stared death in the face. The barrel of Tyree's Frontier Colt looked as big as a canyon, and Tyree's



eyes, staring down at him, were as cold as the grave.

And then Rachel's voice cut across the heavy stillness. "Tyree! Don't!"

It was a near thing. Tyree's finger remained curled around the trigger, but the hammer didn't fall, and Wesley held his breath waiting, as Rachel ran out of the house and laid her hand on Tyree's arm.

"Please don't kill him," Rachel pleaded softly, and when Tyree failed to respond, she stepped purposefully into the line of fire.

Cursing himself for a fool, Tyree lowered his gun.

It was a chance Clint Wesley could not pass up. Taking a quick step to the right, he jerked his gun from the holster and lined it squarely on Tyree's chest as Rachel stepped out of the way.

"Drop it!" Clint commanded. There was a marked quiver in his voice, but his gun hand was steady as a rock.

"Clint, what are you doing?" Rachel demanded, shocked by the sudden turn of events.

"Stay out of this, Rachel," Wesley warned curtly. "He's a wanted man, and I'm taking him in."

Tyree stared at Wesley, weighing his chances of raising and firing his gun before the Marshal could pull the trigger. The odds were slim, but there was always a chance because Wesley was green as grass and not

likely to expect such a desperate move. But even as Tyree considered it, he rejected the idea. He could not gun Wesley down in front of Rachel, could not abide seeing the love in her eyes turn to disgust as he killed a man she was fond of.

Nevertheless, he did not release his hold on the Colt, and his delay made Wesley nervous. Unconsciously, Clint tightened his finger on the trigger. He was as surprised as everyone else when his gun went off. The bullet went high, plowing a shallow furrow along the outside of Tyree's left arm.

Muttering an angry oath, Tyree dropped his gun as the Marshal's bullet raked his flesh.

For a moment, Wesley stared blankly at the blood dripping from Tyree's arm. And then he grinned hugely. By damn, he had done it! Logan Tyree was his prisoner.

Looking extraordinarily pleased with himself, Wesley fished a set of handcuffs out of his back pocket. "Get down here, Tyree," he ordered brusquely.

But the tall gunman refused to obey.

"Clint Wesley, I don't know what you think you're doing," Rachel scolded, "but I'll never forgive you for this. Never as long as I live!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Rachel," Clint said stolidly. "I'm just doing my job. Get down here, Tyree!"

"You want me, come up and get me," Tyree challenged, and some of the smugness went out of Wesley's expression.

Red-faced and wary, the Marshal climbed the porch stairs and locked the handcuffs in place, then he picked up Tyree's gun and shoved it in the waistband of his trousers. He heaved a sigh as he realized it was over. Tyree was unarmed, his hands cuffed behind his back.

Moments later, the two men were riding toward Yellow Creek. Rachel stared after them, utterly shocked by what had happened. Slowly, she began to smile. Who would have thought that Clint would actually summon the nerve to arrest Tyree? "Well, Mr. Wesley," she mused, "you have him now, but you won't have him for long."

The Yellow Creek Jail was a red brick building sandwiched between Wong's Chinese Laundry and the newspaper office. It was a long, low building, with two narrow windows facing the street, and a stout oak door.

Inside, Wesley motioned Tyree into the cellblock, opened the door to the first cell. With a grimace, Tyree stepped into the cell, shuddered imperceptibly as the iron-barred door closed behind him.

Clint Wesley turned the key, removed Tyree's handcuffs, then heaved a sigh of relief. The job was done and, by damn, he had done it! He was whistling a cheerful tune as he stepped out of the cellblock and closed the door that separated the Marshal's Office from the jail.

Tyree stared out the tiny barred window set



high in the rear wall of his cell while memories of the Yuma pen flitted across his mind: the high gray wall, the drab cell, the mean-spirited guards, the twang of the whip striking cowering, cringing flesh. The long days and longer nights. The unpalatable food, the tepid water green with slime.

He began to pace the tiny cell, unconsciously padding back and forth like a tiger in a cage. Damn Annabelle Walsh! He could see her fine hand in all this. And damn his own stupidity. He should have known she would make good on her threat. Obviously, she had given that damn confession he had signed to the Marshal. No doubt she would be the first one at the hanging, the last one to leave. He could see her now, standing right in the front row so she could watch him kick!

Swearing softly, he came to an abrupt halt. Pacing endlessly back and forth would get him nowhere, and he stretched out on the narrow cot that filled most of the cell, only to rise moments later to pace again.

A doctor came to dress his wound. It would heal nicely in a few weeks, the sawbones said. Wesley smiled, and Tyree scowled. If Wesley had his way, Tyree would not have a few weeks.

Tyree was pacing his cell again sometime later when the cellblock door swung open, and Clint Wesley stumbled into view. The Marshal's face was drained of color; his hands, held high above his head, trembled visibly.

Behind Clint, armed with sawed-off shotguns, stood Jorge and Nacho Arango, two of Annabelle's most ruthless killers.

Jorge shoved Wesley into an empty cell, jabbed his shotgun into the Marshal's chest while he looked askance at his brother.

Wesley held his breath and closed his eyes as he waited for Nacho to give the word that would scatter him all over the jailhouse wall.

But Nacho shook his head, and Jorge had to content himself with knocking the Marshal unconscious before backing out of the cell and locking the door.

Tyree stood in the middle of his cell, also waiting, feeling his stomach knot as Jorge unlocked the cell door. Nacho stepped inside, his cocked shotgun buried in Tyree's gut, while Jorge handcuffed Tyree's hands behind his back, then shoved Tyree out of the cell.

The gray stud was waiting outside, along with a dun gelding and a black Morgan mare. Jorge hustled Tyree into the saddle, took the gray's reins, and then they were riding out of Yellow Creek toward Coyote Butte at a brisk trot.

Sometime later, Jorge and Nacho slowed the horses to a walk. The streets of Yellow Creek had been deserted when they left the jail. Likely, no one had yet discovered that the Marshal was unconscious, his prisoner gone.

Tyree glanced at his captors. The Arango brothers were short, stocky men. He recalled seeing them at the Slash W. Neither could

speaking because they had run afoul of a couple of Apache warriors who had cut out their tongues and left them in the desert to die. Rumor had it that Job Walsh had saved their lives, and they'd been riding for the brand ever since.

It was full dark when they reached Coyote Butte. Jorge dismounted and pulled Tyree from the saddle while Nacho drove an iron spike deep into the hard ground, and then lashed Tyree's ankles together. That done, Nacho pulled a length of rawhide from his pocket, pushed Tyree to the ground, and tied his ankles and wrists together behind his back. Lastly, Nacho dropped a loop over Tyree's head, jerked it snug around his neck, then secured the loose end to the iron spike.

That done, Jorge and Nacho prepared a quick meal of beans and hard biscuits, then rolled into their blankets and were quickly asleep.

Wide awake and trussed up like a Christmas turkey, Tyree stared up at the stars, wondering what the hell Annabelle was up to. Apparently, she had decided not to settle for anything as quick as a hanging, unless she meant to tie the knot herself. He glanced at the lone cottonwood some twenty feet away, swore softly as the rope around his neck suddenly seemed to grow tight. Hanging was a bad way to die. The Apache feared it as nothing else, believing that a man's soul left his body with the last breath. When a man was



hung, his soul was forever trapped within his corpse.

Tyree shifted uncomfortably. It was not a pleasant way to spend the night, lying on his side in the dirt with his arms and legs drawn together behind his back and a rope around his neck. There was no way to get comfortable and before long, his muscles began to knot up on him.

The moon was on the wane when he finally fell asleep courting thoughts of vengeance.

Rachel was still furious with Clint Wesley when she rode into town late that night. But mingled with her anger was a grudging admiration for his nerve. Who would have thought that Clint would actually try and arrest Tyree? The fool! She could not help wondering if it had occurred to him yet that, but for her timely interference, he would be laid out in Buckman's Funeral Parlor right now. Instead, thanks to her intervention, Clint was alive and well and Tyree was in jail, wounded and facing the prospect of a speedy trial and a hanging that was likely long overdue.

Patting her skirt pocket, Rachel felt a measure of comfort as her hand touched the derringer nestled inside. She had gotten Tyree into jail, and now she meant to get him out. Clint would be madder than hell when she insisted, at gun point, that he release Tyree. And her father would be appalled when he discovered she had broken a man out of jail.

But it could not be helped. She could not stand quietly by and let Tyree hang.

Yellow Creek was asleep under a pale yellow moon when Rachel turned the buggy down the main street. Reining the horse to a halt in front of the jailhouse, she drew a deep breath as she stepped carefully from the buggy. The gun was cold in her hand as she climbed the steps to the Marshal's Office and she stifled a nervous giggle as she opened the door, thinking how surprised Clint would be to see her wielding a gun and demanding Tyree's immediate release.

Closing the door softly behind her, Rachel hoped, fervently, that Clint would accede to her demands. If he refused, all would be lost, because there was no way on God's earth she could shoot Clint.

The Marshal's office was empty, quiet as death. A lamp, turned low, sent long shadows dancing on the walls as she glanced around the room. Clint's coat was hanging from a nail in the wall, his hat was on the top of his desk. Knowing he usually slept on a cot in one of the empty cells when he had a prisoner, Rachel tiptoed into the cellblock, thinking that, if she were lucky, Clint would be sound asleep and she could free Tyree with no one being the wiser.

But the keys to the cells were missing from the hook inside the cellblock door, and all the cells were empty.

She was puzzling over the whereabouts of

the Marshal and the gunman when a hoarse groan broke the eerie stillness. Rachel's first instinct was to run, but a second groan, louder than the first, sent her to investigate and she found Clint sprawled on the floor of the last cell, his hands pressed against the back of his head.

"Good heavens!" Rachel gasped, kneeling outside the cell. "What happened? Did Tyree . . . ?"

"No. Two of Annabelle's thugs buffaloed me. I guess they took Tyree."

Wesley rose unsteadily to his feet. "Extra key," he rasped. "Bottom desk drawer."

Rachel flew on winged feet into the office, muttering under her breath about the awful clutter in the bottom drawer as she rummaged around for the key to the cell. Apparently Clint never threw anything away, and she was forced to paw through papers, a set of handcuffs, a pair of fur-lined gloves, several socks that did not match, and an old wanted poster with Tyree's picture on it, before she found the extra keys.

Hurrying back to the cellblock, she unlocked the door and stepped into the cell. "Are you all right?" she queried anxiously, not liking the wan expression on his face, or the amount of blood matted in his hair. "Can you walk?"

"Of course I can walk," Clint retorted irritably, but his steps were none too steady as he made his way down the narrow corridor to



the office. With a sigh, he eased down into the big leather chair behind the desk, sat back, very carefully, and closed his eyes.

Rachel whisked around the office, heating water in a pan on the pot-bellied stove, tidying up the top of the desk while she waited for the water to get hot, sweeping the floor because she was too agitated to sit still. When the water was warm, she took a handkerchief from her skirt pocket and dipped it in the pan, then began to sponge the blood from the gash in Clint's head. He winced as the warm water dribbled into the cut above his left ear, cussed aloud when she washed the wound with whiskey she found in one of the other desk drawers.

"Don't waste it all on my head," Wesley admonished, reaching for the bottle. "It'll do a lot more good on the inside."

Rachel frowned as he took a long drink from the bottle. She did not hold with strong drink, but she had to admit his color quickly improved after a swallow or two.

"What are you doing in town this late?" Clint asked, corking the bottle. "Nice young ladies don't generally come calling in the middle of the night. Especially at the jail."

"I came to break Tyree out," Rachel admitted sheepishly.

Clint Wesley could not have been more surprised if she had suddenly stripped naked and thrown herself across his lap.

"Break him out of jail!" Wesley exclaimed. "How'd you intend to do that?"

"With this," Rachel said, taking the derringer from her skirt pocket.

Clint stared at her, speechless. She was the most wonderful, unpredictable woman he had ever known, and he loved her more than words could say. Words, he mused bitterly. If only he had told her how he felt sooner, when it mattered, perhaps she would not now be engaged to a no-good drifter like Logan Tyree.

"I couldn't let Tyree kill you," Rachel explained. "And I couldn't let you hang him, so . . ." She shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"You're the beatenest woman I've ever known," Clint muttered. "How about helping me over to my place and fixing me something to eat? I'm starved."

"Your place? I thought you stayed here?"

"Not any more. I bought the old Miller place."

"Oh, I've always loved that old house. It's so romantic, with all those turrets and stained glass windows. And that wonderful balcony that overlooks the town."

"Yeah, I knew you liked it," Clint said. He had bought the house a few days before Rachel had announced her engagement to Tyree. "I bought it because I hoped that you, that is, that we . . ." Clint coughed and looked away, a flush spreading over his cheeks.

"Dammit, Rachel, I bought the place for you. For us."

"But I'm engaged to Tyree."

"I know," Clint said gruffly. "But, dammit, Rachel, honey, Tyree's a wanted man in practically every part of the country. What kind of life can you have with a drifter like that? He's no good for you, Rachel. He never will be. Sooner or later, somebody's gonna hold onto him long enough to give him the hanging he deserves, and then where will you be? I love you," he declared passionately. "I know I should have said something sooner, but I thought you knew. Everybody else does. I'd make you a good husband, Rachel, or die trying."

He finished abruptly, his eyes begging her to accept his proposal, to admit he was right about Tyree.

Momentarily taken aback, Rachel could only stand there, her eyes wide with surprise at the unexpected force of Clint's words, and the fervent love shining in his mild blue eyes.

"But, Clint," she stammered after a long moment. "I told you before. I don't love you. Not the way you deserve. I'm in love with Tyree."

"Tyree!" The name spewed from Wesley's mouth as if it were poison. "Dammit, Rachel, the man's not fit to wipe the dust from your shoes. He's a drifter, a hired killer! Hell, he'd probably gun you down if the price was right."



"Once, maybe, but not any more. He's changed."

"Sure," Clint said skeptically.

"It's true! He wants to settle down, have a family . . ."

"For how long?" Clint interrupted. "He's a loner, a man with itchy feet. He'll never settle down in one place."

"Clint, please."

"Rachel." His love for her vibrated in his voice. For once, he threw propriety to the wind, and took her boldly in his arms. His kiss was filled with longing and desire and yet, for all that, it was a chaste kiss, lacking the fire and promise that made Tyree's kisses so tantalizingly seductive.

With a sigh, Clint dropped his arms to his sides and took a step backward. There was a sadly haunted expression in his eyes, a note of despair in his voice when he spoke.

"He's wrong for you. Can't you see that?" He laughed suddenly, harshly, bitterly. "Hell, we're probably arguing over nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Tyree is probably heading for the border with Annabelle right now."

"No!"

Wesley shrugged. "Then he's dead."

"Dead?" Rachel frowned. "I don't understand."

"Annabelle showed me a confession, signed by Tyree, a couple of days ago. It said that Tyree killed Job Walsh. Annabelle wouldn't

tell me where she got it, or how, but when she told me about it, I figured she wanted Tyree out of the way for one reason or another and was using the law to get rid of him for her, all nice and legal. But then two of her men broke him out of jail. Why? Either she's decided to forgive Tyree for whatever he did to displease her, which I doubt, or . . .” Clint spread his hands in a gesture that spoke louder than words.

“Or Annabelle decided to exact her revenge herself.”

“Exactly.”

Rachel chewed on the inside of her lower lip. What Clint said made good sense. Annabelle had wanted to see Tyree hang and then, for some reason, she had changed her mind. But why?

Wesley reached for his hat, set it carefully on his head. It had been a hell of a night, but some good had come of it. Tyree was out of the way at last. Maybe, in time, Rachel would forget him. Maybe, in time, Clint could win her love. But for now, he just wanted to be alone.

“Go on home, Rachel,” he said wearily.

“I can't leave you alone, not when you're hurt.”

“I'll be fine,” Clint said roughly. “Go on home.”

With a sigh of resignation, Rachel murmured a subdued farewell and walked out of the Marshal's Office. She knew she had hurt

Clint, hurt him deeply. But she could not marry a man she didn't love just to spare his feelings.

Outside, Rachel gazed into the darkness. Where was Tyree? Confused and sick at heart, she climbed into the buggy and turned the horse toward home.





## *Chapter 20*

*Tyree* woke just after dawn. Nacho and Jorge were gone. But he was not alone. A six-foot rattlesnake lay coiled against his right side, its ugly, triangular-shaped head less than a foot from his own. An involuntary gasp brought a warning buzz from the disturbed reptile.

A long sixty seconds followed, with the snake staring, unblinking, at *Tyree*, and *Tyree* staring back. He had seen a man die from a snake bite once. It had not been a pretty sight: the man's leg swollen and turning black, his eyes wide with terror, the fever that shook him from head to toe as the poison spread through his system, convulsions . . . .

Another minute slid quietly into eternity.

Tyree's shirt was soaked with sweat. Perspiration dripped into his eyes, but he dared not blink it away. He knew a moment of gut-wrenching fear as the snake uncoiled and slithered slowly over his chest, its forked tongue darting in and out.

Holding his breath, Tyree slowly raised his head. Risking a look over his shoulder, he breathed an audible sigh of relief as he watched the snake disappear into a shady spot beneath a squat cactus some eight yards away.

Weak with relief, Tyree wriggled around on the hard ground, seeking a more comfortable position. It was then he saw the big blue bowl filled to the brim with water. Water that sparkled and shimmered in the early morning sunlight. He stared at the bowl, unable to believe it was real and not a mirage born out of his thirst.

It was hard work, inching his way toward the bowl. His wounded arm throbbed with each movement, but he struggled forward, his eyes fixed on the bowl and the promise it held.

He cursed with all the bitter rage of a man betrayed when the tether around his neck pulled him up a mere twelve inches short of his goal. He cursed until his throat was raw and his voice was reduced to a harsh rasp.

When his anger cooled, he turned his back to the sun and closed his eyes. The hours crawled by on leaded feet. The air, hot and dry, covered him like a heavy blanket. Sweat



poured out of him, soaking his clothing, stinging his eyes. Flies came to torment him, crawling over his wounded arm. His lips cracked and bled, and he sucked the salty moisture, desperate for any trace of wetness to ease his horrible thirst. His tongue grew thick in his mouth, his throat felt tight and swollen.

Knowing it was useless, he pulled against his tether in a vain attempt to reach the beautiful blue bowl of crystal water that shimmered like liquid diamonds in the sunshine.

But straining against the hangman's rope only drew the noose tighter around his neck. Only a few inches, he mused ruefully. It might as well have been a mile. A wry grin turned down the corners of his mouth as he contemplated dying in the desert. He had always thought to meet his end quickly, from a bullet fired by that one gunman whose draw would be that fatal fraction of a second faster than his own. Or at the end of a rope. He had never imagined he would die an inch at a time under a blistering sun because he had walked out on a slut.

And still the minutes moved slowly onward and the sun climbed higher in the sky, beating down on his unprotected head, burning into his brain. He closed his eyes against the blinding glare and distorted images from his past crowded his mind. He frowned as people long forgotten paraded through the mists of time. So much killing, so much death. He heard the Reverend Jenkins' voice echo in his ears: "He

who lives by the sword shall die by the sword . . .” and he laughed out loud. The Reverend was sure as hell wrong about that. He would have welcomed a bullet to the torture he now faced.

He shook his head from side to side, seeking relief from the bitter memories that plagued him and suddenly Rachel’s image materialized before him. The other ghosts faded away and she stood alone in his memory.

Rachel. Warm, loving, caring.

Rachel. More beautiful than life.

Rachel. Perhaps he had loved her from the moment he first saw her bending over him. Why had he been so reluctant to admit it?

The hours and minutes they had spent together swirled together in his mind. Always, when he needed her, she had been there. Her tender care had saved his life. She had nursed his hurts, bandaged his wounds, made him realize the value of life. But, more importantly, she had healed the wounds he had carried inside, made him realize he was more than just a worthless saddle tramp, more than a hired gun.

“Rachel.” He sobbed her name aloud, grieving for what might have been.

With a start, Tyree opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was the pretty blue bowl. No matter how many times he looked away, no matter how many times he cursed Annabelle, sooner or later his eyes were drawn back to

the bowl and its precious, life-sustaining contents.

Once, he surged forward with all his might, ignoring the pains that raced through his limbs, ignoring the noose that cut ever deeper into his neck, choking off his breath. He strained forward, straining until the world went black and he fell into a fathomless void.

When he regained consciousness, the setting sun was turning the western horizon to flame. Great splashes of crimson and gold and orange stained the pale blue sky, gradually fading to lavender and then to gray as the sun dropped behind the mountains.

Tyree let out a long breath, shuddered convulsively as his whole body screamed for relief.

A soft mocking laugh drew his attention and he glanced over his shoulder to find Annabelle Walsh staring down at him. She was wearing a blue silk shirt, tight black pants, and black calfskin boots. Even now, when he was wracked with pain and unbearable thirst, he could not help thinking she was the most blatantly beautiful woman he had ever known. The most beautiful, and the most vindictive.

"Thirsty, Tyree?" Annabelle purred wickedly. "Hungry? Do your limbs ache from that dreadful position?" Her laugh was low and decidedly cruel. "You should never strike a lady, you know."



"I never have," Tyree retorted hoarsely, and knew a faint moment of satisfaction as Annabelle's green eyes grew dark with anger.

"Still full of fire, I see," Annabelle mused aloud. She dragged a hand through the thick mane of her red hair. "But that fire will be out by tomorrow. Before the day is out, the vultures will be fighting over your carcass."

"You gonna stay and watch?"

"Perhaps."

Annabelle's eyes moved slowly over Tyree's body, lingering on the taut muscles in his arms, the broad expanse of his chest, his long powerful legs. A melancholy expression softened the anger in her eyes. She had never wanted a man as much as she had wanted Logan Tyree. Why, of all the men she had desired, had he been the one to elude her grasp? No other man had ever been able to resist her feminine charm. Always, in the past, she had dominated the men in her life. But she had never been able to dominate Tyree. Always, he had been the master. Almost, she regretted her decision to kill him. Almost, she reached down to loosen his bonds.

But then the memory of his hand striking her flesh intruded on the thought of what might have been, shattering her wistful reverie. A nasty smile twitched at the corners of her mouth as an involuntary shudder of pain wracked Tyree's body. His pain pleased her, soothing her injured vanity. She was the master now.

A flat rock provided a place to sit, and Annabelle curled her legs under her, deciding she would stay and watch Tyree die. It gave her a sense of power, knowing she held his life in her hands. She could kill him now, quickly, or let him die slowly. She wondered what it would be like to see the life drain out of his body; wondered, absently, if his cool self-control would shatter in the end. It would be immensely satisfying, she mused, to see him break, to hear him whine and beg for mercy.

With greatly exaggerated gestures, she uncorked the canteen she had brought with her and took a long swallow. She was aware of Tyree's eyes watching her every move. Out of pure cussedness, she shook the canteen under Tyree's nose. The water sloshed inside, sounding delightfully cool and wet and refreshing, and Annabelle watched Tyree, waiting for him to beg her for a drink. It would be such fun to hear him beg. She might even give him a tiny swallow.

But Tyree did not beg. He licked his lips as he watched Annabelle take a long drink. But he did not beg.

When he remained mute, Annabelle poured a small amount into her hands and wiped her face and neck. Her sigh of pleasure was long and loud.

"Would you like a drink, Tyree?" she asked, shaking the canteen under his nose again. "It's so hot, and I know you must be *dying* for a drink."

It was in his mind to say yes, to beg her for just one swallow, but he knew her too well; knew she would only laugh in his face.

"Damn you," he rasped, hating her as he had never hated anyone in his life. "I hope you fry in hell."

The sound of approaching horses stifled Annabelle's reply, and she stood up, peering into the darkness.

Glancing past Annabelle, Tyree saw six men riding toward them. A sudden coldness engulfed Tyree as he recognized Joaquin Montoya riding in the lead. Montoya. Dealer in human flesh.

Montoya drew rein near Annabelle. Gallantly, he removed his sombrero and bowed from the waist.

"Ah, Senorita Walsh," he said jovially. "Disposing of that troublesome gunfighter, I see."

"Montoya," Annabelle said warmly. "How nice to see you again." Her eyes sparkled with approval. Montoya was a handsome man, with laughing black eyes and a sweeping black moustache. They were much alike, she mused. Perhaps that was why they got on so well together.

"The pleasure is all mine, chiquita," Montoya replied. He gestured at Tyree. "He looks about done for."

"There's life in him yet," Annabelle remarked. "He will wish for death many times before it comes."

Montoya studied Tyree for a long moment.



Then, dismounting, he squatted on his heels beside the gunman and ran a slender brown hand over Tyree's arms and legs, grunting softly.

"Why not sell him to me?" the bandit asked, rising to stand beside Annabelle.

"Whatever for?"

"I can sell him to the mines. They pay much for big men with strong backs. And this one, I think he could do the work of two men."

"No," Annabelle said, shaking her head. "He must die. Slowly."

"As you wish," Montoya conceded with a shrug. "But you can only kill him once. In the mine, he will die a little each day."

Annabelle regarded Tyree through thoughtful eyes. Montoya was right. You could only kill a man once. And for Tyree, death would come as a welcome release from the pain and thirst and suffering. But the mines . . . to be constantly underground, chained like a beast of burden, driven by the whip . . . ah, there was lasting punishment indeed, worse, in its own way, than death itself. The mine would humble him once and for all. Truly, he would rue the day he had left her.

"You will see he works hard?" Annabelle asked, lifting her gaze to Montoya's face.

"Si, very hard."

"And when he can no longer work?"

Montoya shrugged. "He will be driven out into the desert to die. So you see, in a way, his end will be the same."

"Very well," Annabelle said decisively. She dug into her pants pocket and withdrew the key to Tyree's handcuffs. "He is yours," she said, passing the key to Montoya.

Logan Tyree's eyes never left Annabelle's face. Not when one of Montoya's men cut the rope from his neck, not when they placed him on a horse, not when they tied his feet to the stirrups.

It was spooky, Annabelle thought, the way Tyree stared at her, his yellow eyes cold and unblinking, like a snake's. It was quite unsettling, and she turned away, shivering, as though someone had just walked over her grave.

"Annabelle."

Tyree's voice, raspy and harsh, reached out to her. Slowly, like one mesmerized, she pivoted to face him.

"I'll kill you for this," Tyree vowed. "Some night, you'll wake up to find my hands around your throat."

"You dare threaten me?" Annabelle asked in amazement. "Even now, when I hold your life in my hands?"

"Damn you!" Tyree hurled the words at her. "If you want my life, take it and be done with it!"

Annabelle frowned as she stared at Tyree, bemused by the faint glimmer of fear lurking deep in his eyes. He was not afraid of dying. She knew that. Of what, then, was he afraid?

"It is the loss of his freedom he fears,"

Montoya explained, reading the question in her eyes. "Life is cheap to a man who sells his gun to the highest bidder. But freedom, ah, freedom is much to be prized."

Head cocked to one side, Annabelle looked up at Tyree, and saw the truth of Montoya's words mirrored in Tyree's eyes. Her smile was cruel as she said, with finality, "There will be no death for you this night, Tyree, or for many days and nights to come. Only the rattle of chains on your feet, and the song of the whip on your back. Remember me, every time you pray for death. Montoya, take him away!"

It took six days to reach the silver mine located in a green valley in Mexico. Tyree spent most of that time dozing on the back of a horse, his hands cuffed behind his back, his feet lashed to the stirrups. Nights, when the outlaws made camp, he was shackled to a tree, or to one of the outlaws.

Montoya and his men spent their nights around a comfortable fire, eating, drinking, laughing. Looking forward to the time when they would be rid of Tyree and back home with their women.

Tyree had hoped that, somehow, he would find a way to escape before they reached Mexico, but Montoya was an expert in handling prisoners. He took no chances, made no mistakes, and there was no opportunity to make a break for it.

Tyree had recovered from his ordeal in the



desert when Montoya handed him over to Pedro Diaz, the mine boss.

Diaz was a grossly fat, ugly man with a bald pate, wide-set black eyes, and a mouth full of rotten teeth. He examined Tyree thoroughly.

"Not bad," Diaz muttered. "Not bad. I will give you two hundred for him."

Montoya looked hurt. "Two hundred? Really, Pedro, I think even a blind man could see he is worth more than that."

"No. Look, he has a bad right hand."

"Two seventy-five," Montoya argued. "He is worth at least that much."

"Let us say two fifty and part friends," Diaz countered.

"You drive a hard bargain, amigo," Montoya said with a wry smile.

The fat man's paunch shook like jelly as he laughingly reached into his pocket and withdrew a roll of bills. "You wanted two fifty all the time," Diaz remarked as he counted out the correct amount, "and we both know it. Come, let us drink to a bargain well made."

It was then that Tyree's nightmare began. He was issued a pair of worn white cotton breeches, a threadbare cotton shirt, and a pair of thick leather sandals. When he was dressed, a beetle-browed guard shoved a rifle barrel in his spine and marched him down a dirt path that led to a row of square cages constructed of tin and thick wire mesh.

It took three burly men to wrestle Tyree

into the cage; he shuddered as the door was locked behind him.

Like an animal, he paced the small cage. Three short strides took him from one end of the cage to the other. There was nothing to block his way, no bed, no chair, not even a chamber pot. Back and forth, back and forth, he paced, the tension growing in him all the while. The sun beat down on the tin roof and sweat poured down Tyree's face and neck and back. And still he prowled restlessly to and fro, driven by his anger, and by a virulent hatred for Annabelle Walsh that grew and thrived like a malignant tumor feeding upon itself.

It was just after sunset when the other prisoners emerged from the dark bowels of the mine. They walked with heavy steps and downcast eyes, faces devoid of all expression. The long line of men drew to a halt, and each man stepped into one of the cages. The doors closed. The locks were secured. The work day was over.

Tyree did not sleep that night. The cage was too small to allow for much movement and its sides seemed to close in on him, growing even smaller and more confining.

Worse things were waiting for him the next day. His hands and feet were fitted with shackles, and he was herded into one of the shafts along with a dozen other slaves. The shaft was long and narrow, dimly lit by lanterns strung

from the sagging beams that shored up the tunnel. One of the guards ordered him toward a narrow vein of silver and told him to dig until the vein ran out. It was back-breaking work. The air was stale. His hands blistered. His hatred for Annabelle grew with each stroke of the axe.

In a week, his life had settled into a dreary routine far worse than anything he had ever imagined. He rose with the dawn. Ate a bowl of cornmeal mush. Relieved himself. And then it was time to go into the mine. Four hours later, a skinny Indian boy brought him a hunk of black bread and a cup of lukewarm water. At dusk, he was back in his cage. An hour later, a fat Mexican woman brought him his dinner. It was the highlight of his day, the only meal fit to eat. At dawn, the whole routine began again.

Tyree had thought life behind the dreary walls of Yuma was surely the worst thing that a man could endure. But he had been wrong. His cell in prison had been a mansion compared to the tiny mesh cage. The dusty prison yard looked like the Garden of Eden when compared to the mine shaft. And the guards at Yuma, hell, they had been saints compared to the guards in the mine.

Tyree had endured two weeks of hell when the guard known as Lobo stopped at his cage.

"Gringo," the guard called softly. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah."



"Luis tells me you are a famous gunfighter. Es verdad?"

"Yeah, es verdad."

Lobo thrumbed his chest proudly. "I, too, have the desire to be a gunfighter."

"Congratulations," Tyree muttered sarcastically.

"Tomorrow, you will teach me."

"Get lost, Lobo."

"You will teach me, gringo pig," Lobo said confidently. "Because it is the only way to avoid the mine. Tomorrow, you will work in the barn. I will meet you there."

"Whatever you say," Tyree remarked indifferently. But he felt a quick flutter of hope. Anything would be better than the mine.

Lobo was as good as his word, and the next morning Tyree found himself shoveling horseshit. It was hot, smelly work, but it was better than working in the dark bowels of the earth. He filled his nostrils with the scent of hay and leather and horseflesh. The barn reminded him of the Lazy H, and he thought briefly of Rachel.

He was wondering what she was doing, and what she thought of his disappearance from jail, when Lobo called him outside.

"Now, gringo," the guard ordered cockily. "Teach me."

"Can you use that hogleg?" Tyree asked, gesturing at the Colt's Dragoon holstered on the guard's right hip.

For his answer, Lobo drew and fired at a

bottle he had earlier placed on a fence post.

Tyree shook his head in disgust. "Is that the best you can do?"

"I hit it, did I not?" Lobo boasted, thumping his chest.

"You hit it all right, but I could have put six slugs in your gut while you drew your piece. Your draw has to be all one motion. You can't draw your weapon, cock it, raise it to fire, aim, and pull the trigger. It should all be one continuous move."

Lobo looked skeptical. "Show me," he demanded, handing Tyree an unloaded pistol and a holster.

Tyree strapped the holster in place, then held up his bound wrists. "You'll have to remove these chains."

Lobo hesitated for a moment, then removed the shackles from Tyree's wrists. "Show me," the guard said. "And if you are thinking of trying anything foolish, remember, I did hit the bottle. I will not miss anything so big as you."

Tyree grinned as he slid the gun into the holster. "Like this," Tyree said. "You've got to thumb back the hammer as the gun comes out of your holster. Know where you want your shot to go before you draw your gun and then put it there."

Lobo watched carefully as Tyree drew his gun, thumbing back the hammer as the old .44 cleared leather, coming up smooth and fast, the barrel aimed at a bird perched on a

bush some ten yards away. There was a soft click as Tyree squeezed the trigger.

With a nod, Lobo holstered his gun, drew and fired a second time. This time his speed was better, but he missed his target.

An hour went by before Lobo called it quits. "Tomorrow, gringo," he called over his shoulder. "Same time."

"You're the boss," Tyree muttered laconically, and returned to the stable.

It was rather pleasant there, with just the horses for company. Lobo came in to check on him once in a while; other than that, he was left pretty much on his own. He cleaned the stalls, curried the horses, and thought about escape.

A week slid by. For Tyree, it was seven days of relatively easy work. Lobo grew more and more cocky as his draw improved. Tyree could tell the man spent long hours practicing, for his speed and accuracy seemed to increase daily.

"I heard you were the best," Lobo remarked one afternoon. "Even here, we have heard of your reputation."

"You heard right," Tyree admitted. "Give me a loaded gun, and I'll show you."

"You have given me an idea!" Lobo exclaimed, hitting his forehead with his flat palm. "El Patron has a bodyguard who is rumored to be the fastest gun in all of Mexico. I think it would amuse El Patron to see you and Paulo face each other."



"I think you're out of your mind."

"No, no. It is a great idea. I will give you a week to practice."

"And if I refuse?"

"I think maybe you will meet with a little accident in the mine. Maybe tomorrow. You comprende?"

"Yeah," Tyree drawled. "I comprende."

The shoot-out between Paulo and Logan Tyree was a big success. El Patron and his guards turned out in force to cheer the Mexican gunman. Bets were made, tequila was passed around, and there was much laughing and joking as the two gunmen stood face to face across six feet of sun-bleached ground.

Paulo was a slight young man with a dark olive complexion, straight black hair, and the cold, unblinking eyes of a born killer. He was dressed in tight black pants and a white linen shirt. His gunbelt was hand-tooled leather, all done in fancy scrollwork. His gun was a new, ivory-handled Colt .45.

Tyree looked ridiculous in contrast to the Mexican. His pants and shirt were coarse and ill-fitting. His gunbelt was scarred and worn, his gun an ill-cared for Smith & Wesson.

Both guns were empty because this was a contest for speed only.

Still, there was a decided air of tension between the two gunmen. No blood would be shed, no life hung in the balance, but a man's pride was just as dear as life itself.

Tyree stood easy beneath the blazing sun, his hands loose at his sides, a faint grin on his lips as he contemplated drawing against the younger man. The gun on his left hip was a welcome, familiar weight. His hands, temporarily freed of their restricting shackles, felt as light as air.

When all was ready, El Patron and his men fell silent. Lobo stepped forward to give the signal. Tyree's muscles tensed, though there was no outward change in his expression or his stance.

The signal was given, and Paulo made his move. He was like a snake, smooth and swift, all coiled energy and economy of movement. But Tyree was faster, smoother, more sure of himself. His gun cleared leather and he dry-fired the weapon as Paulo's gun cleared leather.

There was an audible sigh of defeat from El Patron and his cronies; a few quiet cheers from the handful of guards who had backed the gringo gunfighter.

Minutes after the match was over, Tyree's shackles were back in place and he was in his cage again. His vacation was over. The following morning he was back in the mine, back into the bowels of the earth to toil from dawn to dark. He saw men tortured to death, saw them starved and whipped and abused in ways that made the Mescalero look like amateurs.

Sometimes, at night, he could hear the anguished screams of the poor unfortunate

wretches who had foolishly angered one of the guards, or broken a rule. But Tyree felt nothing for the men who labored beside him in the mine. They shared his pain. They shared his misery. They shared his dreams of freedom, but he was a man alone. He did not join in on those rare occasions when the prisoners were permitted to talk to each other, nor did he make any effort to get acquainted with the man in the cage next to his. He had always been a loner, and he felt no need to lament his fate with the other prisoners.

But one thing they all shared in common was a dream of freedom. Tyree spent many hours in the dark of night dreaming of the time when he would be free again, when his life would be his own. It was a hope that kept him going, that made his life worth living.

Sometimes, at night, when the wind was right, the haunting strains of a Spanish guitar drifted down to the cages, reminding Tyree of the night he had danced with Rachel in the yard of the Lazy H. The music, always bitter-sweet, filled Tyree with a deep sadness as he listened to the other prisoners reminisce about their wives and sweethearts and children.

Lying on his back in the cramped cage, Tyree stared up at the indigo sky and thought about Rachel. If his crude calendar was correct, it was May the 24th. Tomorrow would have been his wedding day. Closing his eyes,



he envisioned Rachel clad in a gown of spotless white. Likely, she'd marry Wesley now, he mused bitterly, but maybe it was for the best. The Marshal would make a fine husband, a good father . . . He mouthed an obscenity as he pictured Rachel married to another man, and he put the thought out of his mind and instead imagined Rachel moving about the sunlit kitchen back at the Lazy H, her golden hair cascading down her back, a song on her lips. He remembered the taste and the touch and the womanly scent of her, and the memory aroused such a fierce longing in his heart he thought he would go mad.

But yearning for Rachel was not the worst torture because, even worse than his yearning for a woman was the gradual realization that only death would free him from the misery of the mine.

It was a fact he had always known, deep down. And yet, for the first few months, there lingered a faint unacknowledged hope that he would miraculously win his freedom; that he would once again be the master of his own fate, free to follow the sun, to chase the wind across the prairie, to love a woman with tawny hair and sky blue eyes.

It was a hope that died hard, but in time it was crushed beneath a burden of misery and despair that grew too heavy to bear as, seven days a week, he toiled in the mine, never seeing the sun. His hair grew long and matted, his body was layered with filth. He grew thin,

thinner. His hands blistered, bled, scabbed over, and blistered again, until they became hard and calloused. His ruined right hand did not keep him from working in the mine or affect his work in any way. Indeed, the constant hard work and the long hours spent swinging a pick and shovel restored much of the strength to his right hand. With grim-faced amusement, he thought that, if he ever managed to escape from the mine, he would have to thank Annabelle for the increased dexterity of his broken hand. Thank her, and then kill her.

The days and weeks passed with incredible slowness. Like a dumb beast, Tyree moved obediently to the familiar tune of the whip across his back, silently cursing Annabelle Walsh each time the lash bit into his flesh.

As the weeks became months, Rachel ceased to exist for Tyree, as did everything else in the outside world. There was no room in his life for thoughts of a golden-haired girl with sweet lips and honeyed flesh. There was only room for hatred. Hate for Annabelle, for Montoya, for the guards who ruled his every waking moment. There was no place for memories of happier times. There was only room for hate, and for impotent dreams of vengeance.

## *Chapter 21*

The days that passed so slowly for Logan Tyree passed slowly for Rachel, as well. She refused to believe he was dead. Perhaps Annabelle had nothing to do with the two men who had freed Tyree from jail. Perhaps Tyree had somehow gotten word to those men that he was in jail and needed help. Perhaps Annabelle had regretted her decision to be avenged on Tyree and that was why she sent her men to break Tyree out of jail.

A dozen times a day, she looked out the window, or went to the front door, eyes searching the horizon for some sign of a tall, dark-haired man riding toward her. Nightly, she lay awake in her bed, praying he would



come for her. She would do anything he wanted, go anywhere he desired. Anywhere. Even if it meant going to live with the Indians where he had once known happiness.

But Tyree did not come, and as the days became weeks, Rachel stopped waiting for him and resigned herself to the fact that he was not coming—ever. The tears she had been holding back came then—hot, bitter tears that somehow helped to ease the dreadful ache in her heart.

The twenty-fifth of May was the worst day of her life. She spent most of the afternoon in her room, alone, staring out the window. Where was Tyree? Fighting tears, she went to her closet and ran her hand over the dress that was to have been her bridal gown. With a strangled sob, she snatched the dress from the hanger and began to tear at the fabric with her hands and when the material refused to give way, she grabbed a pair of scissors and slashed the dress to ribbons.

“I hate you, Tyree!” she screamed. “Hate you, hate you, hate you!”

Tears streamed from her eyes and she sank to the floor, her face buried in the soft white material of the ruined gown.

Clint Wesley came to see her almost daily. At first, Rachel was cold, almost rude, blaming him for what had happened to Tyree. But as time passed, her anger turned to apathy,

and then tolerance. Clint told her frequently that he loved her, that he had always loved her. And when he kissed her, it was the kiss of a man who knew his own mind, and not the kiss of a shy boy. He brought her flowers and candy, courting her in earnest, determined to make her love him. He took her to church every Sunday, escorted her to social functions, took her for walks and picnics, anything to cheer her and bring a smile to her face.

For Wesley, it was a time of waiting: waiting for Rachel to forget Tyree, waiting for her affection to turn to the love he so desired, waiting for the day she would agree to be his wife. He wooed her with kind words and tender kisses, never pushing, never demanding, but the waiting was hard.

He sought Rachel's advice in decorating the old Miller place, painted the rooms in the colors she preferred, bought furniture she liked, arranged it as she thought best, always hoping that someday she would share the house with him.

Once Rachel had convinced herself that she would never see Tyree again, she tried to love Clint, tried to convince herself that she was better off without Logan Tyree who had been nothing but an outlaw and a hired gun, after all, while Clint Wesley was a fine honorable man whose thoughts and actions were sincere and above reproach. Clint loved her dearly and proved it in every way possible. But no

matter how she tried, she could not persuade her stubborn heart to forsake the love she felt for Tyree.

Once, she tried to explain to Clint how she felt, but he kissed her to silence, declaring he did not give a damn how she felt about Logan Tyree.

"I love you," Clint had said firmly, "and I won't give up on us until the day you marry someone else. And if that man turns out to be Tyree, then I'll dance at your wedding and wish you all the best. But until then, I aim to keep trying to win your love."

John Halloran looked favorably upon Clint Wesley and the possibility of having him as a son-in-law. Clint was a good man. He would be good for Rachel if she would just give him half a chance. And perhaps Clint would be good for the Lazy H, as well. Perhaps, with a lawman in the family, Annabelle Walsh would stop trying to take over the ranch. Since Tyree's disappearance, Halloran cattle were being stolen from the new herd, fences were being cut, crops were destroyed in the fields.

Often, Halloran wondered why Annabelle did not have him killed out of hand the way she had killed others who opposed her. But no attempts were made on his life, or Rachel's. There was only a constant fight to survive. It was not until Slash W cattle began filtering into his grazing land that he realized Annabelle no longer considered him a threat.



Contemptuously, she allowed him to remain alive, knowing there was nothing he could do to hurt her. Still, seeing Slash W cattle on his range was like a slap in the face, but he could not fight, and he would not run.

In July, Rachel's mare gave birth to a long-legged bay filly.

Rachel watched in wonder as the filly entered the world: first two dainty hoofs, then a silky muzzle, followed by the head, body and hindquarters. Morgana had an easy time delivering her first foal and Rachel felt tears prick her eyes as the mare whickered softly to her foal, then licked the filly's face and ears. Within minutes, the filly was trying to stand. Rachel did not interfere, knowing the foal needed to learn to control her long spindly legs, knowing there was strength in struggling. Finally, after several attempts, the foal managed to gain her feet. Morgana blew softly, and then she began to lick the filly dry.

Rachel grinned as the filly began to root around the mare's underbelly, looking for nourishment. Her thoughts were no longer on the miracle of birth, but on a warm night in August when the gray mustang had sired the filly. The night she had spent in Tyree's arms. It was a night she would never forget. Tyree had been like a stallion himself that night, wild and untamed, bending her to his will, dominating her as the gray stud had dominated Morgana. And she had reveled in it, had

gloried in his strength as she surrendered to him, totally and completely.

Tyree, Tyree. Would she never be free of him? He was there, wherever she looked. She thought of the night he made love to her before the fire, the night he had danced her around the yard, the day they had spent at the box social, the time he had saved Amy from harm, the hours he had spent taming the gray stallion. Every room in the house held a memory of Tyree.

In August, John Halloran surprised everyone by proposing to Claire Whiting, and she accepted. The wedding was held a week later at the church in town. Claire was an attractive, middle-aged woman, and she made a lovely bride.

Rachel wept quietly as the Reverend Jenkins pronounced Claire and her father man and wife. The lovely ceremony, the timeless words that united a man and a woman into one flesh, all seemed to mock the loneliness in Rachel's heart. She had been so certain Tyree would come back to her if he could. So certain. It was hard to admit she would never see him again, harder still because she was certain he was still alive. Somehow, she knew she would feel it if he were no longer alive. Better to think of him alive and well in some Mexican border town, even if it meant she would never see him again, than to picture him dead, his vitality forever stilled. No mat-

ter what the future held for her, no matter what man she eventually married, if she married at all, she knew Tyree would always have a place in her heart.

She smiled wistfully as her father kissed his bride. She recalled asking her father if he thought it wise to marry when they were having so much trouble with Annabelle.

"If I don't marry Claire now," her father had replied, giving her chin a squeeze, "I may never get the chance. Claire knows what I'm up against, and she wants to share it with me."

Fresh tears came then. If only Tyree were here to share their troubles. She had never been afraid when Tyree was near. He had always been so self-assured, so certain of what to do in a crisis.

Clint Wesley smiled indulgently as he handed his handkerchief to Rachel. Women. They were so emotional, always crying at weddings.

The reception, which was held in the schoolhouse, was lively and well-attended, for John Halloran and his bride were well thought of by their friends and neighbors in Yellow Creek.

Rachel sighed as her father and Claire danced the first dance. Her father's wedding had been everything she had hoped hers would be.

When the music ended, John Halloran claimed Rachel for the next dance.



"Well, daughter, what do you think?" he asked as he twirled her around the room.

"I think you've married a wonderful woman," Rachel said sincerely. "I think you'll be good for each other."

"Thank you, child. Now, what about you? Why don't you give in and marry Clint? Don't you think he's courted you long enough?"

"What's the matter, Pa?" Rachel asked, only partly kidding, "Can't you wait to be rid of me now that you've got another woman to look after you?"

"Rachel!"

"I'm sorry," Rachel said, ashamed. "I didn't mean it. Maybe you're right. Maybe I should marry Clint, but—"

"It's Tyree, isn't it? You're still hoping he'll come back."

"Yes."

"Once I thought he would make a good husband for you, honey, but maybe I was wrong. I don't know if he's dead or alive, but I do know that some men are like wild horses. No matter how you try and gentle them, that wild streak persists. You can't beat it out of them, and you can't love it out. It's ingrained too deep. Perhaps that's the way it is with Tyree."

"Perhaps." Rachel gave her father a hug. "Stop worrying about me, Pa. I'll be fine."

John Halloran kissed his daughter's cheek as the dance ended and Clint Wesley came to

claim her. Wesley had matured in the last year, Halloran thought. There was a new air of self-confidence about the man, an air of assurance that had been heretofore lacking in his character. He had turned into a damned handsome man, too, Halloran mused, and tonight he looked mighty fine in a brown suit and tie. He glanced at Rachel and saw that she, too, was aware of the change in the Marshal. Maybe there would be another wedding in the family before too long, after all.

"Take good care of my girl," Halloran said to Clint. "She's the best there is."

"Yes, sir," Wesley agreed heartily. "The very best." And the most beautiful, Clint thought to himself. She looked incredibly lovely tonight in a full-skirted cream-colored gown with long billowy sleeves and a square neck edged in ecru lace. Her hair, as gold as a new-minted coin, was held away from her face with a wide satin ribbon tied in a big bow. She looked young and vivacious and so desirable, it made him ache with longing just to look at her.

"Let's get some air," Clint suggested, and taking Rachel's arm, he steered her out the side door into the schoolyard.

It was a lovely night. The sky was a dark, dark blue. Countless stars played hide and seek with a few drifting powderpuff clouds, while the air was sweet with the scent of honeysuckle.

"They look happy together," Clint re-

marked as they strolled around the yard, "your father and Claire."

"Yes. She'll be good for Pa. He's lived alone too long."

"So have I," Clint said huskily. Taking her in his arms, he bent down and kissed her, a deeply passionate kiss that clearly revealed his longing for the woman in his arms.

Clint's mouth was warm, firm, demanding, touching a deep chord within Rachel that left her feeling shaky and confused. Clint's kisses had never aroused her before. Was she so hungry for a man that any man's kiss would do?

"Rachel, Rachel," Clint groaned. "Honey, please don't put me off any longer. I love you so damn much I'm going crazy."

"Clint, don't—"

"Marry me," he urged, kissing her again. "Tonight, tomorrow, just name the day."

"I can't."

"For God's sake, why not?"

"I don't know," Rachel said evasively. "I just can't. Not now."

"It's still Tyree, isn't it?" Clint rasped angrily. "It's always Tyree. What is there about that bastard that has you so starry-eyed you can't see straight?"

"I don't know," Rachel answered in a small voice. "I only know I can't marry you." Tears sparkled in her eyes. "I know this isn't fair to you, Clint. I wouldn't blame you if you never wanted to see me again. But I can't marry you



until I'm sure it's right, and I can't promise you that it will ever be right."

Clint nodded, his eyes warm and loving as he took Rachel in his arms and held her close. He murmured soft words to her while she cried, and all the while he silently cursed Logan Tyree for causing her pain.

When Rachel's tears subsided, Clint took her back inside and kissed her goodnight.

"I'll wait," Clint murmured as he watched Rachel leave the schoolhouse with her father and Claire. "I'll wait until hell freezes over if I have to."

It was after midnight when the Hallorans started for home. The back of the buggy was piled high with wedding gifts. A huge sign, tied to the back of the buggy, proclaimed, "*Just Married*" in large red letters.

Rachel drove the team while her father and Claire sat together, holding hands and making plans for the future. Claire owned a small house in town and they decided to keep it for the time being, perhaps rent it out.

Rachel drove automatically, her thoughts turned inward. If Tyree had not come into her life, she would have married Clint and considered herself a lucky woman. But Tyree had come, and everything had turned upside down. She thought of Clint, and of Tyree, and she frowned. Maybe what she felt for Tyree wasn't love at all. Maybe she had been confusing lust with love. Maybe she should just marry Clint and settle down and raise a fami-

ly. Perhaps she was being foolish to keep hoping that Tyree would come back to her. What if Clint got tired of waiting for her to say yes and he found someone else; she would wind up as a lonely old maid with no one to love, and no one to love her.

Lifting her head, she stared into the distance. What was she going to do? She shook her head, wishing she knew her own mind. It was then she saw the smoke.

"Oh, my God," she gasped. "The ranch is on fire!"

"Walsh!" Halloran hissed. Grabbing the reins from Rachel, he slapped the ends across the lead horse's rump. "Move, Rusty!" he hollered, and the team broke into a gallop.

When they reached the house, it was beyond saving. The roof had already collapsed and the whole structure was in flames.

The next hour was sheer hell. Racing to the barn, they grabbed feed buckets and began dousing the roof and walls with water. Fortunately, there was no wind to carry sparks to the outbuildings, but it seemed like the wisest thing, to wet down the barn and bunkhouse, just in case.

When that was done, there was nothing to do but watch as the fire gradually burned itself out. Rachel wept as she thought of the photo album that had been consumed in the flames, for it had held a faded photograph of her mother and father on their wedding day,

as well as a cherished picture of her brother, Tommy. So many irreplaceable treasures, all gone, she lamented. Her mother's wedding dress. The family Bible that traced the Halloran births and deaths and marriages back to the year 1795. The delicately embroidered lace tablecloth her grandmother had made. The tiny white dress Tommy had been baptized in.

They spent the night in the bunkhouse, and the next morning, after feeding the stock, they drove back to Yellow Creek.

"At least we're not homeless," Claire said, trying to inject a note of cheer. "We've still got a house to live in."

John Halloran mustered a smile for his bride, but Rachel could not. Everything she loved was gone.

When news of the fire got around, their friends and neighbors came, bringing food and kind words of sympathy and offers to help rebuild when they were ready.

Wesley rode out to the Lazy H to see if he could find some clue as to who might have set the fire, but he found nothing.

John Halloran put on a brave front for Claire, but later, alone with Rachel, he admitted he was beat.

"She's won," he said dispiritedly. "Annabelle Walsh has won at last. I don't have the money, or the heart, to rebuild the ranch. We'll round up what cattle we have left and



sell them. I'll see if I can get some work here in town."

"Pa—"

"I'm through fighting," Halloran said. "But I'll be damned if I'll sell the land! She can run her cattle on it, she can build on it, but it will never be hers. Not so long as I live!"

## *Chapter 22*

*I*t was fall, Rachel's favorite season of the year, but she found no joy in the clear crisp air or in the glorious riot of red and gold leaves that clothed the trees. Though she hated to admit it, she knew her lassitude was because of Tyree. Try as she might, she could not put him out of her mind. She still loved him as much as ever, still clung to the hope that he would come back to her even though she knew, deep inside, that she was kidding herself. He had never really cared for her. He would never come back.

Clint continued to court her as sweetly and patiently as ever a man courted a woman. He never mentioned marriage, and yet Rachel knew she had only to say the word and he

would marry her in a minute. But she would never be happy with Clint. Her heart belonged to Tyree and though he would never come to claim it, she could not give it to another. It was time to be totally honest with Clint, time to tell him she could never marry him. It would be the hardest thing she had ever done, but it was time to let Clint go and stand on her own two feet. Time for Clint to accept the fact that she would never be his. Maybe then Clint would find a woman worthy of him. Carol Ann came quickly to mind. They would be perfect for each other, Rachel knew. Just perfect.

Rachel was thinking about the Halloween party Carol Ann was giving and how she could manage a little matchmaking between Clint and Carol Ann in town later that day. Surely there was some way to bring the two of them together. She was puzzling over the best method when she turned the corner onto Main Street and came face to face with Annabelle Walsh. For a moment, the two women stared at each other. Annabelle was as beautiful as ever, Rachel thought grudgingly. Her flaming hair was swept high on her head, giving her a regal appearance, her full figure was fashionably clad in the latest Paris original.

Annabelle regarded Rachel with open hostility. What was there about this snit of a girl that had so charmed a man like Tyree? Her hair was long and tawny, her figure passable, her face quite pretty, but Annabelle knew without doubt that she, herself, was the more striking of the two. She had wealth and power,



she had offered herself to Tyree, and yet he had left her for some country girl.

Rachel lifted her chin proudly under Annabelle's glacial green gaze. Even at this late date, she felt a surge of jealousy when she remembered that Tyree had once lived under Annabelle's roof. Tyree . . .

"Where is he?" Rachel blurted the words, not intending, until that instant, to speak to Annabelle at all.

Annabelle looked momentarily taken aback and Rachel knew intuitively that Annabelle was the key to the mystery of Tyree's whereabouts.

"You mean Tyree, of course," Annabelle answered with a knowing grin. "He was an interesting man, wasn't he? Wild, unpredictable. Rather like a stallion waiting to be tamed." Annabelle laughed softly, a decidedly nasty laugh. "Neither of us were able to accomplish that, were we?"

Rachel swallowed hard, trying to quell the fear rising in her heart. Annabelle spoke of Tyree in the past tense, as if he were dead.

She shook the thought from her mind. "You know where he is," Rachel said with conviction. "I know you do. Tell me. Please." She almost choked on the last word. How hard it was to humble herself before this woman who had ruined her life and destroyed the only home she had ever known. Yet she knew she would go down on her knees, if necessary, if only Annabelle would tell her where to find Tyree.

"You love him, don't you?" Annabelle said, amused.

"Yes."

"And were you foolish enough to believe he loved you in return?"

"No." The admission was barely audible.

"Tyree and his kind are incapable of love," Annabelle said, a faint note of sadness in her voice.

"So are women like you," Rachel said, and could have bit off her tongue. She had not meant to say the words aloud. Angering Annabelle was the last thing she wanted to do.

"You're a perceptive little bitch," Annabelle said haughtily. "Good day."

"Annabelle, please!"

"He's gone," Annabelle said curtly. "I sold him."

"Sold him?" Rachel repeated, certain she had misunderstood.

"Yes, to an old friend who sells men into slavery south of the border. Save your tears. He's probably dead by now. Or wishes he were. Whatever his condition, I'm sure our friend, Tyree, has no use for a woman. Any woman."

Tyree, sold into slavery. It was too awful to be true. And yet, Rachel could see the truth of it shining in the depths of Annabelle's cold green eyes.

"How could you?" Rachel breathed. "How could you be so cruel, so vindictive?"

"No man walks out on me," Annabelle

replied with a proud toss of her head. "No man."

"You sold Tyree into slavery because he hurt your pride?" Rachel asked in disbelief. "What kind of a woman are you?"

"A rich one," Annabelle murmured with a spiteful grin. "Good day, Miss Halloran."

Rachel stared after Annabelle Walsh, her mind in turmoil. Tyree was a prisoner, a slave in a mine. All these months she had believed he didn't care. She had pictured him drinking and whoring, and all the while he had been a slave. She blinked back the tears welling in her eyes. Crying would not help Tyree.

Turning on her heel, she walked briskly to the livery stable at the end of town. Candido had been working there since her father let him go. Perhaps Candido could help her.

But Candido only shook his head. "You will never get him out, Miss Rachel. I have heard stories about the mines and the men who run them. You cannot get within a mile of the place without being seen. One time I heard one of the owners had all the prisoners killed and dumped the bodies in a mine shaft rather than get caught by the law."

"I've got to do something, Candido. Please help me."

"What does your father say?"

"He's not here. He took Claire to St. Louis. They won't be back until spring."

"I am sorry. I cannot help you."

"Then I'll go alone," Rachel said resolutely.



Candido heaved a huge sigh. "I have a cousin who works at the mine near Verde. Perhaps he can help us."

Days later, Rachel and Candido reached the small town of Verde. Candido's cousin, Lado, was an old man, perhaps sixty years old. He had been a doctor in his prime; then, due to a scandal involving a rich landowner's daughter and a Juarista, he was forced to give up his practice. Now he traveled from mine to mine, treating the prisoners for a few pesos and all the tequila he could drink.

Yes, he had seen the gringo called Tyree.

"The gunfighter," Lado said, nodding sagely. He took a drink from the bottle that was never far from his hand. "I was there the day of the contest between the gringo and Paulo. El Patron was very angry when the gringo won."

"Is he still alive?" Rachel asked anxiously.

Lado shrugged. "Quien sabe?"

Ten minutes later, Rachel had a map giving directions to the mine.

"Senorita, you cannot ride into the mine and demand Tyree's release, nor can you buy his freedom. If the mine owners suspect you know he is there, they will kill him, and perhaps the others, too."

"Well, I've got to do something. I can't just leave him there. I can't go on not knowing if he's dead or alive."

They rode in silence. Rachel's mind concocted and rejected a half dozen ways to free

Tyree, but she refused to give up. There had to be a way.

They were on their way back to Yellow Creek when they skirted the outer edge of Sunset Canyon. Rachel shuddered as she remembered that day: the heat, the Indians . . .

"That's it!" she exclaimed.

"Senorita?"

"The Apache," Rachel said excitedly. "I'll go to the Mescalero. Tyree is their friend. Surely they'll help him."

"No. It is madness."

"I'll need your help," Rachel went on, ignoring his objection. "You can speak a little Apache, can't you?"

"Si, senorita, but . . ."

"Good. If we keep riding, we should find their camp before nightfall."

"Or they will find us," Candido said. "Santa Maria, pray for us."

They did not find the Apache camp, but that night, just before dark, the Indians found them. Rachel gave a little cry of alarm as thirty warriors seemed to appear out of nowhere, their obsidian eyes alight with interest as they came upon two lone white people.

Despite her intention to find the Indians, now that they were here, Rachel was quite frightened. What if they could not communicate with the Apache? What if the Indians killed them before they had a chance to explain what they were doing on Indian land?

She felt a glimmer of hope as she recog-

nized one of the warriors who had been at Sunset Canyon that dreadful day.

She raised her hand in the sign Tyree had told her meant peace. "Friend," she said, hoping the warrior could not detect the fear in her voice. She tapped her breast. "Tyree's woman."

Standing Buffalo stared at Rachel, then he smiled. Yes, he remembered Tyree's woman. His disappointment had been keen that day in Sunset Canyon when Tyree had come to her rescue.

Rachel smiled back at the warrior. He recognized her, she saw it in his eyes.

The warrior spoke to the other braves and they all dismounted. In minutes, a fire was blazing in a shallow pit. The warriors sat on their heels, their eyes on Rachel. Only a few of them spoke English.

"Woman of Tyree, why are you here?"

"Tyree is in trouble," Rachel said earnestly. "He told me that he had lived with the Mescalero, that you were his friends. I've come to you for help because I have no one else to turn to."

Standing Buffalo frowned. "What kind of trouble?"

Quickly, Rachel explained about the mine.

Standing Buffalo nodded. "Yes. Some of our warriors have been taken to that place. It is a bad thing, to keep men as slaves."

"Then you'll help me?"

"Yes. We will ride for Mexico at first light.



One of my warriors will see that you get home safely."

"No. I'm going, too."

"No."

"Yes. He's . . . he's my husband and I'm going with you."

Standing Buffalo smiled. Truly, the woman with the yellow hair had the heart of a mountain lion. Tyree had chosen his woman wisely.

"The Mexican cannot come," Standing Buffalo said flatly. "My people will not ride with him."

Rachel did not argue. The hostility between the Mexicans and the Apaches was well-known, and dated back to the time when the Mexicans paid a bounty for Apache scalps.

They started for Mexico early the following morning. Candido was reluctant to leave Rachel in the company of thirty Apache warriors, but there was little he could do other than beg her to reconsider. But she would not change her mind.

The Indians took no thought of having a woman in their midst. Apache women were strong; some were warriors, some were medicine women. They treated her as a warrior, and expected her to keep up. She was tense and on edge the whole day, knowing it was only the fact she was Tyree's woman that made her presence tolerable. She shuddered to think what would happen to her if she was not under the protection of Tyree's name. Many of the warriors looked at her with desire

in their eyes, a few glared at her in a way that made her know that, under other circumstances, she would have been killed and scalped the same as any other enemy.

By day's end, she was sure she was going to die. She ached in every part of her body. Her red shirt felt glued to her skin, her tan riding skirt was dusty, the hem torn where she had snagged it on a spiny cactus. Her boots were covered with dust. Never could she recall feeling quite so dirty or so utterly bone weary. Muscles she had not known she possessed shrieked in protest every time she moved. She was certain her legs were permanently bowed from the hours she had spent in the saddle; the insides of her thighs felt raw.

Standing Buffalo handed her a strip of jerky, offered her a drink of water from a waterskin. "We will start again at first light," he said. His black eyes studied her carefully. She had not complained once during the long trek. Perhaps, if Tyree were dead, he would keep the woman for his own.

Rachel felt her cheeks turn pink under the warrior's continued gaze. What was he thinking? His eyes, as dark as the night sky, were unfathomable, his face impassive.

She took a long drink from the waterskin before returning it to Standing Buffalo. "Thank you," she said, and looked away, unable to meet his gaze any longer.

The next day was the same as the last. They rode for miles across a land populated by little

more than sand and cactus and an occasional reptile. Sweat poured down Rachel's face and neck and back, making her feel sticky and uncomfortable. Her feet and hands swelled, and she found herself yearning for a bath as never before.

The Indians rode silently, oblivious to the heat and the long ride. They paused only once, shortly after noon, to eat and rest the horses.

Wearily, Rachel loosened the cinch on the saddle, gave her weary horse a pat on the neck. She was glad she had left Morgana at home. This horse, a sturdy buckskin gelding, was much better suited to long hours and scant feed. He was a range bred horse, part mustang, part Quarter horse.

All too soon, the Indians were mounting up again. With a sigh, Rachel tightened the cinch and climbed into the saddle. Never, in all her life, had she spent so many hours on the back of a horse.

Later that afternoon, a handful of warriors broke away from the main group to go hunting. They returned at dusk with a wild turkey and several rabbits. Rachel's mouth began to water as she looked forward to fresh meat for dinner that night.

And still they traveled across the land, heading due south. Across low hills covered with catclaw and paloverde, through deep gullies and narrow valleys, across a shallow river, and suddenly they were in Mexico.



Rachel had lost track of the days when one of the scouts rode into their night camp with the news that the mine was less than a day's ride away. Rachel's weariness vanished like snow beneath a blazing sun. Tomorrow she would see Tyree!

She could not sleep that night, not when they were so close. She closed her eyes and summoned Tyree's image to mind, still clear even after all these months—the length and breadth of him; eyes that were the color of amber glass; a mouth that could be by turns warm and tender or fierce and demanding; hair as black as sin. Every nerve ending in her body seemed to come alive, yearning for his touch.

She was still awake when the Indians began to stir. They were unusually quiet as they moved about the camp. They did not eat breakfast. Small clay pots appeared and the warriors began to paint their faces for war. For the first time, it occurred to Rachel that there was going to be a fight, that men would be killed. Until that moment, she had not thought of the cost, only the joy of seeing Tyree again. But of course there would be a fight. They could not just walk in and pluck Tyree from the mine. There would be guards, a warning cry, a battle. Tyree could be killed . . . .

She shook the thought from her mind. She had not come this far to fail.

She glanced at the warriors moving around

her, and was suddenly afraid. These men were savages, strangers. They were killers, delighting in butchery and torture. What was she doing here? Why had she trusted them? Even now, they might turn on her.

She uttered a small cry of fright as a hand dropped on her shoulder. Whirling around, she stared, wide-eyed at the warrior beside her, and then let out a sigh of relief. It was Standing Buffalo, his face hideously streaked with black paint.

"Will you wait here?"

"No."

He nodded, as if he had expected her to refuse.

Ten minutes later they were riding toward the mine. Rachel's nerves were taut. Time and again she patted the derringer in her skirt pocket. Would she have the nerve to shoot a man, if necessary? Could she bear to take a human life? Only time would tell.

It was dusk when they reached the valley that housed the mine. From her vantage point, Rachel stared at the wooden outbuildings that housed the guards, then swung her gaze to the big stone house where the mine owners lived. And then she saw a long row of cages. They were empty, she saw with dismay, but even as she watched, she saw dozens of men being herded toward the cages. She leaned forward, eyes straining, but she could not pick Tyree out of the line of shackled, bearded men. It was a pitiful sight, she

thought, her heart aching. The guards herded the prisoners like sheep, whipping those who did not move fast enough.

Tyree, Tyree. She could not bear to think of him being in such a dreadful place, could not stand to think of him suffering as these men were obviously suffering.

And then Standing Buffalo gave the signal and she was swept down the hill toward the mine, her horse carried along with the others as the Indians urged their ponies down the gentle slope and across the barren ground in front of the mine. A shout went up from the guard tower, and then the Mexican pitched over the railing onto the ground, an arrow in his throat.

The war cries of thirty Apache warriors filled the air as the Indians swarmed over the main house and outbuildings. Two thirds of the Mexicans were killed in the first rush, taken completely by surprise.

The noise and the gunsmoke were overpowering, and Rachel felt as though she were living in a nightmare as she guided her horse toward the long row of cages, the derringer in her hand. Indians and Mexicans fought and died on all sides, but she rode through the midst of them, her eyes riveted on the cages ahead, a silent prayer in her heart that she would find Tyree.

Men called out to her as she rode past, screaming for her to let them out of the cages, but she did not hear them, so intent was she on finding Tyree. A Mexican in a dirty blue



shirt grabbed at her leg and she fired the derringer in his face, felt her insides heave with revulsion as his eyes and nose dissolved in a sea of blood.

And still she rode on. And then, near the end of the row, she saw him. He was standing at the door of the cage, staring at the fire that had started in one of the outbuildings some fifty feet away.

Rachel screamed his name as she jumped off her horse.

Tyree's head swung around, and his eyes widened with stunned disbelief. "My God," he thought, "I must be seeing things."

"Tyree, stand aside!" Rachel had to shout to be heard above the gunfire and the roar of the flames.

She was real. He whispered her name as he stood to one side while she shot the lock off the door. And then she was in his arms, her sweet mouth pressed to his. But only for a moment.

"Come on, we've got to get out of here," Rachel urged. "Get on my horse."

"I can't."

"Damn!" She had forgotten about the shackles that hobbled his feet.

She was wondering what to do when Tyree dragged her down the row of cages to where a man lay face down in the dust. It was the man Rachel had killed, and she turned away, fighting the urge to vomit as Tyree began to search through the dead man's pockets. At last, he found the key. Moments later, his hands and

feet were free, and he tossed the key ring to the prisoner in the nearest cage.

Rachel heard Tyree mutter, "Good luck," under his breath as he lifted her into the saddle of the buckskin and swung up behind her. She felt a surge of relief as they started out of the yard. Thank God, Tyree was safe.

She kicked the buckskin, urging the horse to go faster, wanting to get away from the mine and the misery it represented. She did not think about the men they had left behind, or the Indians who might have been killed, she thought only of Tyree, of his hands gripping her waist.

She was smiling to herself as they rode out of the yard, congratulating herself on a job well done, when the pain hit. Glancing down, she was horrified to see the side of her shirt was dark with blood. Feeling suddenly light-headed, she grasped the buckskin's mane with her free hand. They could not stop now, not until she was sure Tyree was out of danger. She could not lose him again.

Once, she glanced over her shoulder. The mine buildings were all ablaze. Prisoners were streaming out of the yard, running away from the flames. She saw a man rolling on the ground, his clothing aflame. And then the warriors came riding toward them, blocking everything else from sight.

She tried to smile at Tyree, but his face blurred before her eyes and she felt herself falling, falling, into nothingness.

Tyree swore under his breath as Rachel went limp in his arms. A sharp tug on the reins brought the buckskin to an abrupt halt. It was then Tyree saw the blood staining Rachel's shirt.

"My God." He breathed the words as he lifted her shirt. Blood oozed from a bullet wound just under her ribcage. With an oath, he pressed his hand over the ugly wound, felt her blood well between his fingers.

Taking Rachel in his arms, he dismounted and laid her gently on the ground. Only then was he aware of Standing Buffalo and the other Indians milling around.

"Is she dead?" The question came from Standing Buffalo.

"No. Get me some blankets and some water."

"We will camp here," Standing Buffalo informed the others. "Red Elk, see to the wounded. Five Bears, take some men and find us some meat."

With quiet efficiency, the Indians began to make camp for the night.

Tyree took the blanket Standing Buffalo offered and placed it under Rachel. Removing his shirt, he ripped off a piece and began wiping the blood from her side. There was only a single entry wound, indicating the bullet was still lodged somewhere in her side. Gently, he probed the wound with his finger, but he could not locate the slug.

Rachel's eyelids fluttered open. She smiled



weakly as she saw Tyree bending over her. "You're safe," she murmured.

Tyree nodded as his hand caressed her cheek. "You damn fool," he scolded gently. "What are you doing riding around the countryside with a bunch of savages?"

"I came to find you," Rachel said thickly. "And I did."

"Yes. Lie still now. Don't talk."

"Am I going to die?"

"No!"

Rachel smiled at him. Of course, he would lie to her, but it didn't matter. He was alive and well. She did not care if she died, so long as it was in his arms.

"I've got to take the bullet out," Tyree said.

"No."

"It's got to be done."

Rachel shook her head violently from side to side. "No. Please, Tyree."

"Hey, you've spent a lot of time looking after me. Now it's my turn to take care of you."

Rachel glanced up as Standing Buffalo came to stand beside Tyree. He had a waterskin in one hand, and a long-bladed knife in the other. Rachel stared at the knife in horror. She could not bear it, she thought frantically. She could not bear the pain of the knife probing her flesh.

"Take me home," she pleaded. "Take me to Yellow Creek, Tyree. I want a doctor."

"Yellow Creek is ten days ride from here," Tyree replied.

"I don't care."

"Trust me, Rachel. That bullet has got to come out. Now. It won't get any easier if you wait." He took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze. "Trust me, Rachel. Just this once."

She nodded, then shuddered as Tyree took the knife from Standing Buffalo.

Tyree stared at the long blade. How could he dig the bullet from Rachel's flesh? He knew the agony it would cause her, knew he would rather cut off his right arm than cause her pain. Just thinking about cutting into her tender flesh made his palms sweat.

"Do you want me to do it, my brother?" Standing Buffalo asked quietly.

"No!" Rachel grabbed Tyree's hand. "You do it," she cried. "I don't want anyone else to do it but you."

Tyree nodded. "Here." He wadded up a strip of cloth and handed it to her. "Bite on this. Standing Buffalo, hold her down so she doesn't move."

Rachel closed her eyes, her teeth biting hard on the rag in her mouth as Tyree began to probe the wound with the knife. Pain coursed through her side, worse than anything she had ever imagined. Blood flowed in the wake of the blade, hot and wet and sticky. She clenched her hands into tight fists, her nails digging into her palms. Her thoughts

became confused. Sometimes it was Tyree who held the knife, probing her flesh, causing her terrible pain, and sometimes she was back in the past, reliving the day she had cut the bullet from his side. How had he stood the pain? How could she? When would it end?

She opened her eyes and saw Tyree's face through a red haze of pain. His brow was furrowed, sheened with sweat, his jaw rigid. She groaned as the knife slipped deeper into her side, heard Tyree swear softly, and then everything went black.

"Thank God," Tyree muttered. "She's fainted."

A short time later, he removed the slug from her side. He looked at it for a long moment, then tossed it aside. A little higher, he thought bleakly, a little higher and she would have been dead.

He washed the wound as best he could, packed the hole with tree moss to stop the bleeding, bandaged it with what was left of his shirt.

"The Mescalero will be at their winter camp by now," Standing Buffalo remarked. "We can be there day after tomorrow."

Tyree nodded. Rachel had lost a good deal of blood. Likely, she would soon have a fever. The doctor at Yellow Creek was too far away to do them any good, but there was a medicine man at the Apache camp. And he wanted a shaman close by, just in case.



## *Chapter 23*

She opened her eyes slowly, blinking as she glanced around. Where was she? A low fire burned at her feet, a domed roof covered her head. Frowning, she saw a war shield propped against the wall, a lance, several clay pots and jars.

Alarmed, she tried to sit up, only to fall back as a sharp pain lanced her side. It came back to her then, the ride to Mexico, the battle at the mine, Tyree. Where was Tyree?

A short time later, a withered old man dressed in fringed buckskin pants and a sleeveless vest entered the lodge. He gave Rachel a toothless grin as he gathered up several items from the back of the lodge.

Muttering something to her in guttural Apache, he hurried outside again.

She was fretting over her whereabouts and the awful ache in her side when Tyree stepped into the wickiup. Just seeing him made her feel better. He had shaved and washed and trimmed his hair, and she thought he had never looked better, or more welcome.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"A box canyon about seventy miles from the mine. The Mescalero come here for the winter." He sat cross-legged beside her. "How are you?"

"Fine, now that you're here."

Tyree smiled. It was good to see her awake and alert. She had been unconscious for two days, burning with fever, and only the medicine man's skill had saved her. He knew he would never have forgiven himself if she had died.

"How long have we been here?" Rachel asked. "When can we go home?"

"No questions now. You rest."

"I'm tired of resting. I feel fine, really."

"Never mind. You just stay put." Tyree grinned suddenly. "Do I have to take your clothes away to make sure you won't get up until I say it's all right?"

Rachel laughed, wincing as the movement sent a fresh shaft of pain through her side. "I'll be good," she promised.

For the next few days, she ate and slept and ate again. Thanks to the wizened old medicine

man, her side healed quickly and she was on her feet again before the next week was out, although Tyree would not let her stay up too long. Still, it was wonderful to be able to sit outside and feel the sun on her face.

It was a unique experience, sitting outside the medicine man's lodge in the middle of the Apache camp. These were the people Tyree had grown up with, and she studied them carefully. The women were short and tended to be plump. Their hair was long and straight and black, their eyes dark, their skin the color of copper. They wore long doeskin tunics that reached their ankles, or cotton blouses and full swirling calico skirts. Rachel was surprised to discover that Indian women were not so different from white women. They cared for their loved ones, sewed and cooked and mended, laughed and cried, nursed their young, argued with their husbands. They tended small vegetable gardens and made beautiful baskets from willow rods. Sometimes strips of black devil's-claw were intertwined with the willow to create intricate designs.

The Apache men spent their time hunting or gambling or repairing their weapons. They played with their children, guided the young warriors along the path to manhood, protected the village. They wore clouts and knee-high moccasins and deerskin vests. Their hair was also long and black, frequently adorned with feathers or bits of fur.



The children were happy, bright-eyed and inquisitive. They stared at Rachel with unabashed curiosity, fascinated by her golden hair and sky-blue eyes. The little girls played with dolls made of corn husks or helped their mothers with chores and younger brothers and sisters; the boys played at hunting and making war.

They were a proud and fearsome people and Rachel shuddered when she remembered the tales of treachery she had heard. The Apaches were rumored to be the most vicious fighters in the Southwest. The Chiricahua chief, Cochise, had fought in a long and bloody war with the whites that had lasted ten years. Geronimo was still at war with the Army, though he was currently raiding and killing far to the south. It was said the Apache fought without mercy, that they delighted in the shedding of blood.

For all their fearsome ways, they were a highly superstitious people. The newly dead were to be avoided at all costs, the names of the deceased were never spoken aloud lest their spirits be called back to earth. The Apache did not eat the fish that thrived in the river because it was believed the fish was related to the snake and was therefore cursed.

Rachel glanced around the camp. The Apache called themselves Dineh, meaning the People, the chosen ones. The name Apache was a Zuni word meaning enemy.

Rachel smiled warmly at Tyree when he came to sit beside her.

"You okay?" he asked. The concern in his eyes warmed her heart.

"I'm fine."

"That was a brave thing you did, coming after me."

Rachel shrugged. "I couldn't just leave you there."

"You could have," Tyree said quietly. "How the hell did you know where to find me anyway?"

"I asked Annabelle."

"Annabelle!" Tyree swore profusely, his hands itching to sink a knife into the treacherous heart of the flaming-haired woman who had sold him into hell.

"If it weren't for Annabelle, I never would have found you," Rachel remarked matter-of-factly.

Tyree snorted. "Hell, if it weren't for Annabelle, you wouldn't have had to come looking for me. Which, by the way, was a damn fool thing to do."

"You're welcome," Rachel said dryly.

"You know what I mean. Standing Buffalo told me how he found you. Dammit, Rachel, you might have been killed."

"It was a chance I had to take. But if you're sorry I found you, just say so, and I'll take you back!"

"Hold on," Tyree said, laughing softly. "I

didn't mean to make you mad." He placed his hand over her arm, let his fingers slide up the smooth flesh to her shoulder, to her neck, to the gentle curve of her cheek. Her skin was soft, warm. He gazed into her eyes, as blue as the sky above, and thought how brave she had been to come after him. His nostrils filled with the scent of her, stirring his desire, and he wished she were well enough that he could carry her into the lodge and make love to her. He had yearned for her for so long, wanting her, needing her.

His eyes moved over her face and found it perfect. Slowly, his gaze settled on her lips. Her mouth was slightly open, looking warm and inviting. Again, he thought of all the days and nights he had longed for her, and he bent forward to kiss her.

A soft laugh sounded from nearby. Rachel quickly drew back, her cheeks flushing, as she looked over Tyree's shoulder and saw several Indian children watching them.

Tyree glanced over his shoulder and scowled. "Go on, get lost," he muttered irritably, and Rachel laughed out loud as the children scattered.

"Oh, Tyree," she murmured, "it's so good to be alive."

As Rachel's strength returned, they began to take long walks together, resting when she grew weary, sometimes napping in the shade of a windblown pine. Tyree looked wonderful



in the buckskins he wore, Rachel thought proudly. His hair, uncut for the last six months, hung past his shoulders, emphasizing his Indian blood. His skin had regained its healthy color now that he no longer spent the daylight hours underground, and from a distance it was hard to distinguish Tyree from the other Indian men.

Despite the fact that she was surrounded by a savage people and living in a crudely built brush hut, despite the strange food and the harsh guttural language she could not understand, Rachel was happier than she had ever been in her life. Tyree was alive and well. His amber eyes glowed with longing when he looked at her, and she could hardly wait until she was well again, until she could show him how much she loved him.

The old medicine man moved out of his lodge, taking up residence with his sister for the duration of their stay so that Tyree and his woman could be alone. Sometimes Rachel felt as if they were the only two people in the world, especially late at night when the village was asleep and she lay wrapped in Tyree's arms, her head pillowed on his shoulder, his breath warm against her face.

The first night they made love was like something out of a dream. The fire cast eerie shadows on the walls of the lodge. The buffalo robe beneath her was soft and warm, primitive. Tyree lay naked beside her, his dark bronze skin kissed by the light of the flickering

flames. His eyes glowed brighter than the fire as he lowered his body over hers, his mouth caressing every inch of her eagerly quivering flesh, his hands moving intimately over her body until she was aflame with desire. She whispered his name, her arms twining around his neck as her hips lifted to receive him. Their flesh merged and now, engulfing him, she felt whole, fulfilled. Together, they soared upward, ever upward, leaving the earth and its cares far behind . . . .

Many nights, after the evening meal had been eaten and the children were in bed, the Apaches gathered around a central campfire to dance and sing and tell stories.

Rachel watched, fascinated, as the warriors danced and postured around the fire, recounting tales of great battles, of enemies slain and coup counted. Their copper-hued skin glistened brightly in the flickering light of the flames. Their faces, hideously streaked with paint, were reminiscent of spirits escaped from the bowels of hell. The rhythmic beat of the drums, the high-pitched chanting of the drummers, the rapt faces of the women and old men, all combined to make Rachel feel as if she were caught up in a world that was not quite real.

One night, Tyree joined the men as they danced. Rachel stared at him in wonder. Now, for this moment, he was totally Indian. His shoulder-length hair was held from his face

with a strip of red cloth. His skin, as swarthy as any of the Apaches, glowed in the firelight. He was clad only in a brief wolfskin clout and knee-high moccasins, and Rachel felt a queer churning in the pit of her stomach as she watched him dance. He belongs here, she thought absently. He's a part of this, a part of the People. He was so handsome, so male, she felt a sudden rush of desire as he passed before her, his amber eyes alight with the joy of the dance, his head thrown back as he uttered a shrill cry.

It was good, Tyree thought exultantly, good to dance the dances of the People, good to be a part of the whole instead of standing on the outside looking in. He laughed aloud, filled with the joy of being alive. How easy it was to shed the veneer of civilization, he mused. How easy it was to revert to the old ways, the ancient ways. He knew a sudden yearning to ride to war, to feel the wind in his face as he went out in search of scalps and glory.

His feet moved easily to the rhythm of the drum, the Apache words came readily to his lips as he joined in the song. The night was filled with stars, the air was heavy with the scent of sage and woodsmoke and tobacco. The firelight danced along the sides of the wickiups, creating shadow dancers who bobbed and swayed to the beat of the drum. His eyes sought Rachel's face and he felt the desire swell in his loins as she smiled at him. Her blue eyes were wide as she watched him



dance, and he wondered what she was thinking. Did she find him frightening, disgusting, repulsive? His steps carried him nearer to where she sat with some of the other women, and he let out a wild cry as he read the expression in her eyes. She was not disgusted by what she saw. The drumming, the dancing, the sweat dripping down his torso had awakened a primal urge within the core of her being. He saw it in her eyes and was glad.

Later, alone in their borrowed lodge, he made love to her, possessing her wildly, fiercely, making her feel like some primitive, uncivilized female completely devoid of modesty or shame. Caught up in the moment, Rachel gave herself to Tyree with carefree abandon, holding nothing back, but gladly giving all she had to give.

She was embarrassed to face him the following morning. What would he think of her? No lady worthy of the name would have behaved in such an uninhibited fashion. She had touched him and fondled him as never before, boldly exploring his lean frame, finding new ways to excite him. It had all seemed so right under cover of darkness, but now she was not so sure. Perhaps she had gone too far. But when she found the courage to meet his eyes, she saw only tenderness there.

The days passed, one upon the other. They walked in the woods, swam in the icy river, made love beneath the bold blue sky.

One night Tyree pulled her into the circle of

dancing men and women. Rachel blushed, her awkwardness making her uncomfortable and self-conscious. But Tyree refused to let her quit. The steps were simple, few in number, and she quickly learned the dance. She smiled at Tyree, pleased with her success, letting herself sway in time to the soft beat of the drums, basking in the desire she read in his eyes.

They had been in the Indian camp about three weeks when several of the young girls reached puberty. This was, Rachel learned, a time of celebration. The girls were dressed in elaborately painted and beaded costumes and then they danced before the tribe. The ceremony lasted four days. Four, Tyree explained, was a magic number. There were four directions to the earth, four seasons in the year.

During the celebration, many ritual chants and dances were performed, punctuated with feasting, entertainment and gift-giving. Rachel stared in awe as four Apache warriors stepped into the firelight one evening. They were dressed in spectacular kilts, black masks, and wooden headdresses. Each carried a wooden sword. They were called Gans, Tyree said, and represented the mountain spirits. Usually they danced to ward off evil or to cure an illness, but on this night they danced only to entertain.

At the end of the four days, the girls returned to their lodges. It was strange, Rachel thought, that the Indians made such a fuss



over a condition of nature that white women spoke of only in whispers.

It was January when Rachel began to think about going home. Pleasant as her stay with the Indians had been, she could not remain at the rancheria indefinitely. Soon, her father and Claire would return from St. Louis. She did not want her absence to cause her father to worry when there was nothing to worry about. Not only that, but she was beginning to miss the comforts she was accustomed to, things like a hot bath in a tub, clean sheets on a soft bed, a downy pillow, fresh milk and cheese and bread. She wanted to put on a clean dress and go shopping in town, buy a new hat, visit with Carol Ann, go to church, read her Bible . . . so many things to do, things she had never thought she would miss until they were out of reach.

Yes, it was time to go home. She voiced the idea to Tyree later that night when they were alone in their lodge.

"Home." Tyree stared into the coals. "For me, this is home. I hadn't realized how much I missed it all until now."

He slanted a glance in Rachel's direction, saw the dismay in her eyes. "Don't worry," he said with a wry grin. "I'll take you back to Yellow Creek." His voice grew harsh, his expression ominous. "I have a little unfinished business with a certain black-hearted bitch."

"Annabelle." Rachel breathed the name aloud, hardly aware that she had spoken.



"Yes," Tyree said flatly. "Annabelle."

"Tyree, I thought that we . . . that you and I . . . I mean." She looked at him helplessly. He had not mentioned loving her, had not mentioned marriage. And now, suddenly, neither could she. "You know what I mean?"

"I know. We'll talk about it later. Right now you'd better get some sleep. We'll leave first thing in the morning."



## *Chapter 24*

*T*hey left the rancheria early the next morning. For Rachel, going home had lost some of its enchantment. Tyree had spoken of the Indian camp as home. Would he return to the Apache once he had delivered her safely to Yellow Creek and her father's house? She could not bear the thought of losing him again, yet she could not summon the courage to ask what his plans were. If he was going to leave her, she did not want to know it. Not yet.

They talked of inconsequential things as they rode across the prairie. Rachel spoke of her father and Claire, of how Annabelle had burned the Lazy H, how Slash W cattle were running on Halloran range. She spoke of the new mercantile, of the five new families that



had moved into town. She did not ask Tyree about the six months he had spent in the mine, and he did not enlighten her. She knew, nevertheless, that it had been hard on him. There was a new tenseness about him, a new bitterness in his eyes. There was something else, too, an intangible something she could not quite put her finger on. Sometimes she caught a hint of it when he thought she wasn't looking at him, an odd look lurking in the back of his eyes. She worried over it for several days and then, late one night, she saw Tyree staring into the flames and she knew what was driving him. It was a deep-rooted need for vengeance against Annabelle Walsh.

Despite the heat of the fire, Rachel felt suddenly cold all over. Logan Tyree was a violent man, a dangerous man to run afoul of. She felt a sudden surge of pity for Annabelle.

It took ten days to reach Yellow Creek. Rachel breathed a sigh of relief as she rode into the side yard and stepped wearily from her horse. This place would never be home the way the Lazy H had been home, but just now it looked like a king's palace. She smiled at Tyree as he came up behind her and took the buckskin's reins.

"I'll put the horses away," he said.

Rachel nodded. "I'll put the coffee on," she remarked, and hurried inside, weak with happiness because he wasn't just going to drop her off and ride on.

Claire's house was not particularly large,

but compared to an Apache wickiup, it seemed huge. She bustled about, and all the while she was thinking of Tyree, wanting Tyree.

She felt a rush of anticipation as he entered the kitchen and closed the door.

"Would you like to wash up?" Rachel asked. "There's a tub on the porch. It will only take a few minutes to heat some water."

"Sounds good." He pulled a chair out from the table, threw a leg over the seat and rested his arms on the back.

Rachel poured him a cup of coffee, aware of Tyree's eyes following her every move. She filled several large kettles with water from the pump and set them on the stove to heat.

"How's Wesley?" Tyree asked after a lengthy silence.

"He's fine," Rachel answered, frowning. "Why?"

Tyree shrugged. "Just curious. He still hanging around?"

"Not so much."

"Does he still want to marry you?"

Rachel felt herself go cold all over. "Yes, he does."

Tyree nodded, his eyes thoughtful.

"Tyree—"

"That water hot yet?"

"Yes."

With fluid grace, he unfolded from the chair, brought the tub inside, emptied the steaming pots of water into the tub. He swung

around to face her, one heavy brow raised in question. "You gonna watch?" he asked laconically. "Or join me?"

"Neither," Rachel said, unable to stay the color suffusing her cheeks. "I'll wait in the parlor."

She left the room quickly, her cheeks burning. With the Apache, they had been so close. They had talked and laughed and shared the most intimate moments she had ever known. But here, in this house, she felt shy and ill at ease.

In the parlor, she paced the floor, her thoughts chaotic. Why hadn't Tyree mentioned marriage? What would her father say when he came home and found Tyree in the house? What would she say to Clint? Even though she had told Clint she could not marry him, ever, she knew he felt it was only a matter of time before she changed her mind and said yes. What would she do if Tyree left in the morning? And what about Annabelle?

Her thoughts came to an abrupt end as she heard Tyree step out of the tub. The vision of him standing naked in the kitchen filled her veins with fire and before she quite knew what she was doing, she was through the door and in his arms.

Without a word, Tyree lifted her in his arms and carried her through the parlor and down the hall to the bedroom, his mouth pressed over hers. Rachel clung to him, her whole being conscious of his damp flesh, of his



hands deftly unfastening her shirt. His mouth never left hers as he undressed her and then they were lying side by side on the bed, their bodies pressed together.

That night, Rachel poured her whole soul into her lovemaking, wanting Tyree to know that he was loved, that he need never be alone again.

Later, he fell asleep holding her in his arms, holding her as if he would never let her go. Rachel lay beside him, studying his face, loving every line, every curve. The tears came then, falling silently down her cheeks until she, too, fell asleep.

When she woke, she was alone.

Tyree's thoughts were filled with Rachel as he rode out of Yellow Creek. She was a hell of a woman, he mused. Bright, beautiful, full of spirit and fire. Damn, she had guts, too, going to the Apache, then riding into Mexico to rescue him from that damn mine. He had used her and abused her, and she still loved him. Not even Red Leaf had loved him with such an all-consuming, all-forgiving love.

He thought of Rachel nursing him when he had escaped from Yuma, thought of her standing at the foot of his bed, her bright blue eyes shooting sparks at him as she ordered him to stay put. He saw her spread-eagled between four Apache bucks in Sunset Canyon, her eyes filling with hope when she saw him. He saw her lovely face lined with real concern

when he went to her after Annabelle's men had whipped him and destroyed his gun hand. He saw the hurt welling in her eyes when he broke his promise to marry her and went to work for Annabelle instead. No other woman had ever shed tears for him.

Rachel. She was too good to be true. When had he fallen in love with her? When had she stopped being just a warm desirable body and become a person? When had he started to care what she thought of him?

With an effort, he put Rachel out of his mind as he crossed the narrow winding river that marked the beginning of the Slash W spread. Eyes and ears alert, he guided the Indian pony across the sleeping land. A cow bawled a warning as he passed too close to her calf, but other than that, his passing disturbed neither man nor beast as he closed in on his destination: the Slash W storehouse. Annabelle had always been careful to keep extra supplies on hand in case of an emergency, and Tyree had need of everything from boots to hat.

An hour later, the building he sought loomed in the darkness. Dismounting some two hundred yards from the storehouse, Tyree pulled the saddle and bridle from the Apache pony and shooed the horse away. If all went as planned, he would be mounted on a better animal before the night was out. If his plans went awry, he would have no need for a horse, or anything else.



Padding forward on silent feet, knife in hand, Tyree approached the storehouse, tip-toed warily around the corner of the building. A tall silhouette moved in the shadows; the telltale glow of a cigarette arched through the air as the cowhand guarding the storehouse tossed a burning butt into the dirt.

Soundless as a stalking cat, Tyree crept up behind the unsuspecting wrangler. Once he would have killed the man without a qualm, Tyree mused. But that was before Rachel entered his life. With a wry grin, he picked up a good-sized rock and hit the man across the back of the head, rendering him unconscious.

The door to the storehouse opened on well-oiled hinges as Tyree dragged the sentry inside and closed the door behind him. Using the wrangler's kerchief, he tied the man's hands behind his back. A quick search of the man's pockets turned up a pack of matches and Tyree lit the lamp hanging inside the door. Turning the wick down low, Tyree moved through the storehouse, helping himself to a pair of black whipcord britches, a dark blue shirt. Picking through a pile of hats, he selected a black felt stetson with a flat crown and a wide brim. Boots came next, and then a red silk kerchief which he knotted loosely around his neck. He lingered over a choice of guns and finally picked a used Navy Colt in a plain leather holster, and a full cartridge belt.

Outside again, he ghosted toward the barn



where a second Slash W cowhand fell victim to a sharp blow on the head. The butt of the Colt split the man's scalp just behind his ear. Blood dripped on Tyree's hands as he dragged the man into the barn. The blood was warm and wet and strangely satisfying and Tyree stared at the crimson smear for several moments, a bemused expression on his swarthy face. The quick violence, the blood on his hands, had released much of the anger he had been carrying around for the past six months.

Much. But not all.

He quickly hogtied the unconscious cowhand, stuffed a rag into his mouth and deposited him, none too gently, inside a vacant stall.

The inside of the barn smelled of animals and manure and hay. Moving carefully in the velvet darkness, Tyree headed for the stall that housed Annabelle's own mount, a flashy paint stallion with a blaze face.

He was about to throw a bridle over the paint's head when a familiar whinny stayed his hand. Grinning with real pleasure, Tyree made his way to a stall at the far end of the barn.

The gray mustang whickered a second time as Tyree opened the stall door and stepped inside. How like Annabelle, Tyree mused as he saddled the stud, to keep his horse for herself. A reminder, no doubt, of her victory over a man who dared walk out on her.

With a final tug on the cinch, Tyree led the

gray outside. He tethered the horse to a nearby oak tree, then hunkered down on his heels in the shadows outside Annabelle's bedroom, his eyes focused on her window.

He sat there, quiet as the night surrounding him, waiting for her light to go out.

The time passed slowly, but Tyree possessed the patience of a warrior. As a youth, he had once crouched in a pit for two days, waiting for an eagle to alight on his hiding place so that he might grab the bird and help himself to three of the white-tipped feathers so prized by the Mescalero.

An owl sliced noiselessly through the sky, great wings outstretched, talons poised to strike should an unwary rabbit or mouse venture into the darkness. A cat moved soundlessly through the shrubbery. A coyote yapped in the distance. But Tyree remained motionless as a rock.

Memories drifted down the corridor of his mind. The sting of the whip across his back. The long months of endless darkness in the bowels of the earth, searching for silver that was not even there. The longing for fresh air and cool clear water, for the touch of the sun on his face.

Anger stirred within him, making him impatient for the vengeance he had promised himself, and he thrust the memories aside. Briefly, he thought of Rachel, sleeping peacefully in her father's house.

It was well after midnight when the light in Annabelle's room went out. And still Tyree waited. Five minutes. Ten. Twenty.

After thirty minutes had gone by, he rose quietly to his feet, carefully opened the window, and stepped over the sill. Annabelle was a dark shape on the bed. He watched her for a moment, glad she was alone. Striking a match, he lit the lamp on the rosewood table beside her bed and turned the wick down low. Then, moving light as a feather, he straddled Annabelle's hips. His hands closed gently around her throat.

Annabelle's eyes fluttered open and she stirred restlessly as she tried to dislodge the weight from her hips. She came instantly awake as she recognized Tyree. She stared up at him, unblinking, for a full thirty seconds before she whispered his name.

"Tyree."

"Yes, ma'am."

His hands tightened cruelly around her neck and she shuddered beneath him, her delectable body trembling with fear and apprehension. But she did not struggle, and she did not plead for mercy. She just lay there, passive, her luminous emerald eyes gazing up at him, her full breasts rising and falling, straining against the sheer pink fabric of her nightgown.

The scent of her perfume was strong in Tyree's nostrils, reminding him of the nights



she had tried to lure him into her bed. He was glad now that he had never made love to her.

"I've missed you," Annabelle said as he loosened his grip on her throat. She raked her nails over the muscles in his arms, let her hands slide down to caress his thighs. "I still want you, Tyree.

Suddenly, he felt sorry for her. With a sigh, he took his hands from her throat.

Annabelle's smile was a trifle smug as she rubbed a hand across her throat. She gazed up at him through her lashes, then patted the pillow next to hers, inviting him to join her under the covers, certain he would not be able to refuse such an invitation.

Tyree took a deep breath. She looked warm and willing, lying there, her green eyes alight with desire, and yet she did not stir him at all. She was nothing compared to Rachel.

Rachel. He stared at Annabelle, bemused. Why was he wasting time here when he could be with Rachel?

"Tyree?"

"So long, Annabelle." He stood up, all thought of vengeance forgotten.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," he said in a voice filled with wonder. "Home to Rachel."

"If that's what you want," Annabelle said with a shrug. Carelessly, she raised her hand and let it slide under her pillow. Home, indeed! If she could not have Tyree, then no one

would have him. She smiled seductively as her fingers closed over the derringer.

Tyree swore as he realized she was reaching for her gun. Quick as a cat, he grabbed her wrist. Annabelle screamed with rage, her free hand clawing at Tyree's face, her legs kicking wildly as she fought to keep hold of the gun.

Tyree dragged Annabelle off the bed and they struggled in taut silence for several moments. Once, catching sight of the hatred that twisted Annabelle's face, Tyree wondered why he had ever thought her beautiful.

He had almost succeeded in wresting the gun from her hand when Annabelle kicked him in the groin, hard. With a grunt, Tyree doubled over, striking Annabelle's shoulder and knocking her off balance so that she fell back on the bed, dragging Tyree with her. There was a muffled explosion as the gun, pinned between their bodies, went off.

Annabelle writhed violently, her arm knocking the oil lamp off the table beside the bed, her hand pushing against Tyree's chest. An expression of horror contorted her face as Tyree stood up and she saw the blood welling up from her left breast. Then a shudder convulsed her body and she lay still, her green eyes vacant of life.

For a moment, Tyree stared at Annabelle, unmindful of the flames caused by the spilled oil lamp. Somehow, he thought it fitting that Annabelle had died by her own hand. And her own hatred. Then, as the fire began to lick at

the sides of the bed, he turned on his heel and vaulted out the window.

He lingered in the darkness, watching the flames spread, watching as the hired hands fought to put out the raging blaze.

It was after dawn when he started for Yellow Creek.





## *Chapter 25*

Rachel was sitting in the kitchen, staring into a cup of cold coffee, wondering . . . wondering if Tyree had left her for good. Wondering how he could leave without a word after the night they had shared. She would have sworn he loved her, would have staked her life on it even though he had never said the words. Now she was not so sure. Where was he?

A knock at the back door disturbed her thoughts and she hurried across the room, her heart beating fast. Perhaps Tyree had come back to her. Dear God, please let it be Tyree.

Her face mirrored her disappointment when she opened the door and saw Clint

Wesley standing there, his face a mask of concern.

"Morning, Clint," she said without much enthusiasm. "Come in."

"Rachel, you darn fool, I just got through talking to Candido. Are you out of your mind, running off into the desert like that? You might have been killed. Or worse."

"I'm fine," she replied dully. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No." Clint shoved his hands into his pants' pockets. "Did you find him?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

Clint did not believe her, and he was about to say so when footsteps sounded in the hallway. He drew his gun as Logan Tyree stepped into the kitchen.

Too late, Rachel started to call out a warning. Then, with a shrug, she sat back in her chair, a sudden intuition admonishing her not to interfere between the two men this time.

Tyree did not seem surprised to find the Marshal standing in the kitchen with a gun in his hand. Calm as could be, he crossed to the stove and poured himself a cup of coffee. For the first time in his life, he knew exactly what he wanted. It was a good feeling.

He shifted his coffee cup to his right hand, smiled lazily. "Morning, Marshal," he drawled, his eyes fixed on the Colt .44 nestled in Wesley's hand.



"Keep your hand away from that gun," Clint warned curtly. "I don't want to have to kill you."

"No?"

"No. I want to see you hang for the murder of Job Walsh, among other things."

"I'd like to avoid that, if you don't mind."

"Shut up!" Wesley snapped. He cocked the Colt, his mild blue eyes alight with the force of his hatred. If it weren't for Logan Tyree, Rachel would have been his wife long ago.

Tyree stirred impatiently. "Wesley, I don't want to draw on you, but if you don't put that gun down, I'm gonna take it away from you."

Wesley snorted. "I may not be a fast gun, Tyree, but I think I can crank off a round or two before you can . . . damn!" He swore as Tyree's bullet slammed into his forearm, knocking the Colt from fingers gone suddenly numb.

"You talk too much," Tyree mused, holstering his weapon.

Without a word, Rachel picked up a tea towel and wrapped it around the shallow wound in Clint's arm.

"This doesn't solve anything," Clint said through clenched teeth. "I intend to see you hang if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Wesley, you're a damn fool," Tyree observed without rancor. "And you'll never amount to anything as a lawman if you don't wise up. When you've got the drop on a man, you don't stand around listening to him jaw."

You either take his gun from him, or you kill him."

"Thanks for the lesson," Wesley muttered sarcastically.

"No charge," Tyree replied with a grin. "As for killing Walsh, you've got no proof that I gunned him. No witnesses. No evidence."

"I've got proof," Clint said triumphantly. "I've got your signed confession."

"Really? I'd like to see it."

"It's out at the Slash W. Annabelle showed it to me months ago."

"Forget it, Marshal. The Slash W went up in smoke late last night."

Rachel and Clint stared at Tyree, mouths agape, and then Wesley sighed heavily.

"All right, Tyree," the Marshal said wearily. "You win." He glanced at Rachel, then swung around to face Tyree again. "You're no good for her!" he lashed out. "You told me so yourself."

"That's true," Tyree said soberly.

"I'd make her a better husband than you ever could."

"True again," Tyree agreed with a shrug.

"And I love her." Clint looked at Rachel, his eyes pleading with her. "I do love you," he said fervently.

"I think he means it," Tyree said. "Any fool can see he's crazy about you."

Clint smiled exuberantly. Things were going better than he had dared hope. "He's a drifter, Rachel. I'll bet he's never stayed in

one place longer than a few months at most."

"All true," Tyree agreed, grinning broadly. "But you've left out one thing. I love Rachel. And she loves me."

"Yeah." Wesley sighed heavily. Anyone could see that Rachel loved Tyree. It was there in her happy smile, and in the warmth of her eyes when she looked at Tyree.

"Clint, I'm sorry—"

"It's alright, Rachel," Wesley said, forcing himself to smile. "Be happy." Picking up his gun, he shoved it in his holster and left the house. Somehow, in his heart, he had known Rachel would never be his.

"Well?" Tyree said, taking Rachel in his arms. "Say something."

"I love you."

"I know that," he growled. "Dammit, Rachel, I hope you know what you're getting yourself into."

"I know," she said quietly, and then she smiled up at him, her face radiant, her eyes glowing. "You were right all along," she said, laughing merrily. "The beautiful princess should always marry the dragon."

"Told you so," Tyree said, grinning at her. It wouldn't be easy, hanging up his gun, settling down in one place. But with Rachel by his side, he could do it. By damn, he could do anything!

For a moment, Rachel fretted over the way she had hurt Clint, and then she brightened. Carol Ann would be there to comfort Clint, to



give him the love and support every man needed. They were perfect for each other.

And then Tyree was kissing her, kissing her as if he would never let her go, and there was no room in Rachel's heart or thoughts for any other man. Only Tyree, always Tyree . . .

# INDIAN ROMANCE AT ITS PASSIONATE BEST

by MADELINE BAKER

"Madeline Baker proved she knows how to please readers of historical romance when she created *Reckless Heart* and *Love in the Wind*."  
— *Whispers*

**LOVE FOREVERMORE.** When Loralee arrived at Fort Apache as the new schoolmarm, she had no idea she would fall into the arms of a fiercely proud, aloof Indian warrior. An autographed bookmark edition.

\_\_\_\_\_2577-9

\$4.50 US/\$5.50 CAN

**RECKLESS LOVE.** Joshua Berdeen was the cavalry soldier who offered Hannah Kinkaid a life of ease in New York City, but she was bound to the handsome Cheyenne warrior who had branded her body with his searing desire. The fiery sequel to *Reckless Heart*.

\_\_\_\_\_2476-4

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

**LOVE IN THE WIND.** Katy Maria Alvarez had decided to enter a convent, but fate had other plans for her. Katy's coach was attacked by Indians, and she became the slave of arrogant warrior Iron Wing.

\_\_\_\_\_2390-3

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

**RECKLESS HEART.** They had played together as children—Hannah Kinkaid and the Indian lad. Then Shadow and his people went away, and when he returned, it was as a handsome Cheyenne brave who awakened Hannah to a passion she had never known.

\_\_\_\_\_2255-9

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

## LEISURE BOOKS

ATTN: Customer Service Dept.

276 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10001

Please send me the book(s) checked above. I have enclosed \$\_\_\_\_\_  
Add \$1.25 for shipping and handling for the first book; \$ .30 for each book thereafter. No cash, stamps, or C.O.D.s. All orders shipped within 6 weeks. Canadian orders please add \$1.00 extra postage.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Canadian orders must be paid in U.S. dollars payable through a New York banking facility. ☐ Please send a free catalogue.

# Breathtaking Historical Romance

by **ROBIN LEE HATCHER**

"Lively, tempestuous romance!"

—*Romance Readers Magazine*

**GEMFIRE.** Fiery Gem McBride was only fifteen when Chase Dupre won her in a lucky hand of poker, but she swore Chase was the only man for her, no matter how high the odds against their love.

\_\_\_\_\_2638-4

\$4.50 US/\$5.50 CAN

**PIRATE'S LADY.** Held captive on a pirate ship bound for white slavery in Constantinople, Lady Jacinda Sutherland found passion and danger in the arms of Captain Tristan Dancing. An Autographed Bookmark Edition.

\_\_\_\_\_2487-X

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

**HEART'S LANDING.** Vivacious Brenetta Lattimer became the object of her scheming cousin's jealousy as Megan plotted to win handsome Rory O'Hara from Brenetta. But Brenetta could not give up the man who had first awakened her to the sweet agony of desire.

\_\_\_\_\_2595-7

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

\_\_\_\_\_2585-X **STORMY SURRENDER** \$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

\_\_\_\_\_2412-8 **PASSION'S GAMBLE** \$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

\_\_\_\_\_2318-0 **HEART STORM** \$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

## LEISURE BOOKS

ATTN: Customer Service Dept  
276 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10001

Please send me the book(s) checked above. I have enclosed \$\_\_\_\_\_  
Add \$1.25 for shipping and handling for the first book; \$ .30 for each book thereafter. No cash, stamps, or C.O.D.s. All orders shipped within 6 weeks. Canadian orders please add \$1.00 extra postage.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Canadian orders must be paid in U.S. dollars payable through a New York banking facility. ☐ Please send a free catalogue



# CLASSIC ROMANCE

## By Bestselling Author Karen Robards

**FORBIDDEN LOVE.** After a passion-filled night, Megan knew she had given her body and her heart to the one man in the world whose bride she could never be—her guardian, Justin Brant.

\_\_\_\_\_2549-4

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

**ISLAND FLAME.** Curvaceous Lady Catherine Aldley was furious when pirate captain Jonathan Hale claimed her as his prize, but her burning hatred turned to waves of passion in his muscular arms.

\_\_\_\_\_2471-3

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

### LEISURE BOOKS

ATTN: Customer Service Dept.  
276 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10001

Please send me the book(s) checked above. I have enclosed \$\_\_\_\_\_  
Add \$1.25 for shipping and handling for the first book; \$ .30 for each book thereafter. No cash, stamps, or C.O.D.s. All orders shipped within 6 weeks. Canadian orders please add \$1.00 extra postage.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Canadian orders must be paid in U.S. dollars payable through a New York banking facility. ☐ Please send a free catalogue.

## AUTOGRAPHED BOOKMARK EDITIONS

Each book contains a signed message from the author and a removable gold foiled and embossed bookmark.

### SCARLET SURRENDER

Sandra DuBay

"Wonderful escapist fiction. It fulfills all her readers' fantasies!" — **Romantic Times**

Young Victoria traveled from war-torn New Orleans to the shores of France in search of her husband, a man she didn't love. But the innocent beauty would find love en route to her destination — in the strong arms of the handsome captain, Grey Verreaux.

\_\_\_\_\_2555-8

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

#### LEISURE BOOKS

ATTN: Customer Service Dept.

276 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10001

Please send me the book(s) checked above. I have enclosed \$\_\_\_\_\_  
Add \$1.25 for shipping and handling for the first book; \$ .30 for each book thereafter. No cash, stamps, or C.O.D.s. All orders shipped within 6 weeks. Canadian orders please add \$1.00 extra postage.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Canadian orders must be paid in U.S. dollars payable through a New York banking facility. ☐ Please send a free catalogue.

# SUMMER STORM

Catherine Hart

"Hart offers a gripping, sympathetic portrait of the Cheyenne as a proud people caught in turmoil by an encroaching world."

—*Publisher's Weekly*

SUMMER STORM. Soft and warm as a sweet summer rain, Summer Storm could be tamed only by Windrider, a brave leader of the Cheyenne. Though she had given her heart to another, he vowed their tumultuous joining would be climaxed in a whirlwind of ecstasy.

\_\_\_\_\_2465-9

\$3.95 US/\$4.95 CAN

## LEISURE BOOKS

ATTN: Customer Service Dept.  
276 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10001

Please send me the book(s) checked above. I have enclosed \$\_\_\_\_\_  
Add \$1.25 for shipping and handling for the first book; \$ .30 for each book thereafter. No cash, stamps, or C.O.D.s. All orders shipped within 6 weeks. Canadian orders please add \$1.00 extra postage.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Canadian orders must be paid in U.S. dollars payable through a New York banking facility. ☐ Please send a free catalogue.





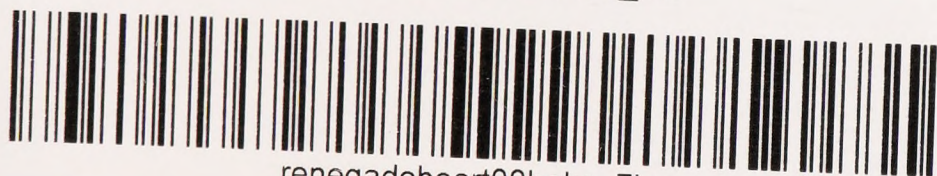




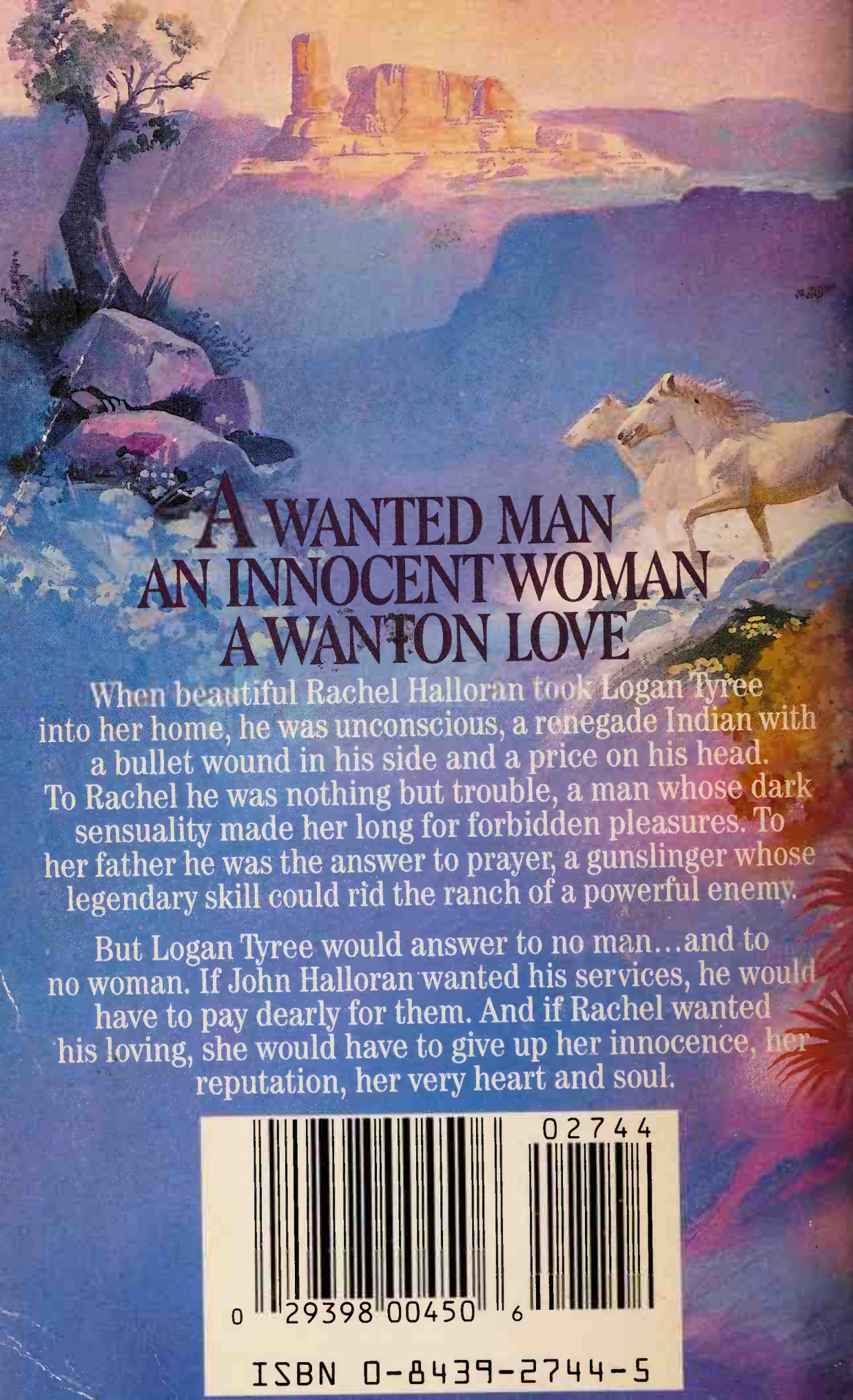


renegadeheart00bake\_7ie

renegadeheart00bake\_7ie



renegadeheart00bake\_7ie



# A WANTED MAN AN INNOCENT WOMAN A WANTON LOVE

When beautiful Rachel Halloran took Logan Tyree into her home, he was unconscious, a renegade Indian with a bullet wound in his side and a price on his head. To Rachel he was nothing but trouble, a man whose dark sensuality made her long for forbidden pleasures. To her father he was the answer to prayer, a gunslinger whose legendary skill could rid the ranch of a powerful enemy.

But Logan Tyree would answer to no man...and to no woman. If John Halloran wanted his services, he would have to pay dearly for them. And if Rachel wanted his loving, she would have to give up her innocence, her reputation, her very heart and soul.



ISBN 0-8439-2744-5